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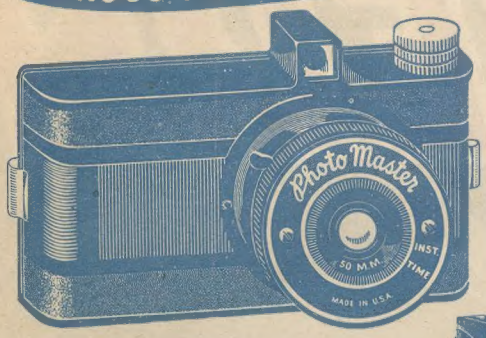

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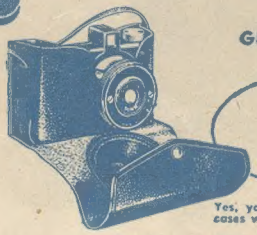

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FAMOUS WESTERN

Volume 7 ★ Fall, 1945 ★ Number 3

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Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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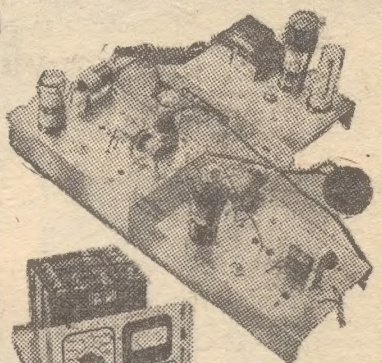

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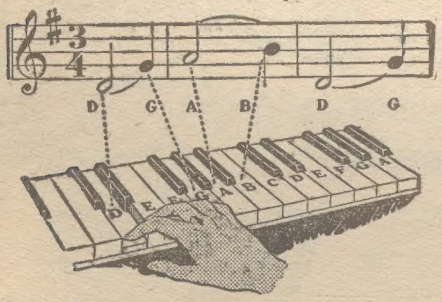

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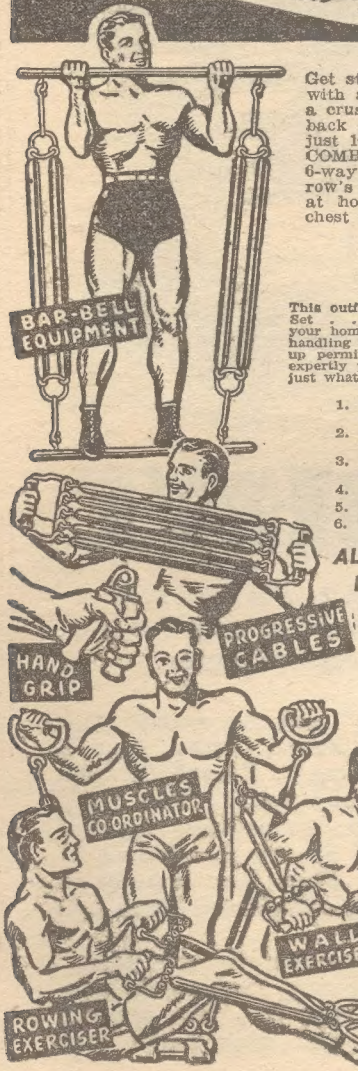

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His bullets nicked a post. The Great Marpane had missed an easy shot!

THE GREAT

To Gotch Bell, Cat Marpane was the greatest gunfighter who ever lived — and a right square hombre to boot. Then his idol missed an easy shot in a gun-duel with a two-bit over a worthless honky-tonk dame.

OUTSIDE, the rain was a solid curtain mocking the warmth of the faint yellow glow from the windows of *Texas Annie's Pinto.* Big buxom Texas Annie with her crashing peals of laughter had long since been laid to rest up in Boothill beyond Mound City; but the limping gambler and the Easterner with lung trouble who'd bought the place had retained the name. Men knew it from the Peace River down to the hard-baked plains of the Panhandle. Say "Mound City" and the answer was, "Sure. You know Texas Annie's there, of course." Everybody who came to Mound headed for *Texas Annie's Pinto*; the partners clinched it by making up for the absence of Texas Annie when they brought in honey-skinned, baby-faced Mary Lou Waters.

"She's an operator with real class," was the way Finny, the limping gambler partner, put it. "She reminds men of the girl back home they

MARPANE

By T. W. Ford

(Author of "Bounty Hunter's Reward," "Outlaw's Court," Etc.)

might have hitched up with before they got all dirtied up with Life."

But right then Mary Lou's face was lacking its provocative pout. Her dark red hair was straggly; she knew it and did nothing about it. The cold shrewdness of her blue eyes dominated at the moment, and she did nothing to conceal that light in them. Mary Lou didn't like it when the Pinto wasn't thronged and pulsing with humanity, preferably half drunk and therefore easier to work. But the wet-streaming night was like a wall around the big honky tonk of Mound City's Whisky Row, marooning it from the rest of the world. And there was a dead feeling inside the place.

Redeye Higginsland, the undertaker and town drunk, slumbered in solitude at the end of the long bar counter. Over at the piano, the "Perfessor" sat poring over that thumbed book of poems nobody else could make any sense of. At times a damp

draft blowing across the vacant dance floor stirred his long yellowed locks. The lamps in the back of the place had been doused and there was something ghostly about the look of the green baize tops of the card tables back there. When a blast of wind shook the frame of the old building, the jagged crack bisecting the bar mirror seemed to move like a thin black snake. And from outside, constantly, came the soft sizzling sound of raindrops spatting against the building fronts and on the wooden sidewalks. Mary Lou shivered and pulled the serape over her bare shoulders.

"Ain't a fitten night fer a coyote much less a human critter," said Bowser, the drink wrangler, toothpick wagging in front of his gold teeth. "Still, that wouldn't keep Marpane from coning through—if he's headed this way."

LOUIE, the faro dealer, nodded his sharp face. They were seated around one of the tables fringing the dance floor, Bowser, and Louie, and Gotch Bell, the house guard who was as noisy as a tombstone. A couple of others of the staff and Mary Lou of course. Gotch Bell started to nod, even opened his mouth for one of his few speeches. But he clamped it up sourly when he saw Mary Lou pluck the tailor-made quirly from the fingers of Diamond Pelley, the gambler from Norcross. Gotch Bell had killed four men in his time; but he didn't believe even a honky tonk girl should smoke.

"Dang right," Pelley spoke up instead, "He'd walk plumb through Hell itself barefooted was he after a gent. Ever hear tell of the time over at Garrison when," he slid his arm across the shoulders of the girl beside him, "he—"

"Sure," said Louie. "That was the time he burned down Evans, that trigger-crazy deputy. It come out afterward that Evans shot a horse-thief dead after the poor devil surrendered. Seems he was just a younker and it was the fust horse he'd ever took. So Marpane cut himself in. Sure. I—"

"How about a drink?" said Mary Lou sullenly, jiggling her shot glass.

"Sure, sure," said Pelley, peeling a bill off his role and flashing it onto the table. "Make it a hull bottle." He wanted to impress Mary Lou. He leaned closer to her and whispered something in her ear that made her give a forced laugh.

Bowser came back with a bottle and neatly poured fresh shots all around, talking as he did. "Strange thing about that Cat Marpane. Nobody knows what side he's on. Some places he's wanted by the Law—like for blasting Evans—though that was only fair and just. Yet the gents outside the Law are afraid of him too."

"You know why he's called 'Cat'?" asked Pelley with the important air of one about to impart a secret. "A friend of mine knew him and—"

"Sure," Louie the faro man topped him again. "When he was a young button, somebody named him 'Wildcat.' Cat's just a shortening of that. You know, they say he started out as a hired killer himself."

"He's a plumb great gunman," said Gotch Bell reverently. "The king of 'em all."

"Heard he'd answered the owl-hoot," Bowser picked up Louie.

"This friend of mine said that—" Pelley began again, running his hand over his sleek hair to show off the ring with the big diamond.

"Friend?" Bowser cut him off. "My *brother* was there when Cat Marpane brought in the Turner Bunch—the five he didn't kill. 'S a fact, Louie. You say he rode the owl-hoot once. Well, them Turner boys was sore as boils 'cause they claimed one of their own kind turned on 'em. They said one of the bunch was in the Big House when Cat Marpane was doing a stretch there too. Now. . ."

SETTING his stove-pipe hat at a jaunty angle, Pelley turned to the girl. "Some folks make so much noise they never learn nothing. Now I could really tell you things about Marpane." He dropped his voice as she turned a skeptical look on him. "You see, Mary Lou I weren't always a gambler. You might say I was fast with my hands in other ways."

"Really?" she said and patted back a little yawn as she picked up her drink. The building creaked in the buffeting of the storm and she stiffened against a shudder. Her nerves weren't as steady as normally.

Pelley leaned closer, determined to impress her. "Fast with my hands—in other ways. With a hogleg, maybe. I ain't saying exactly. Anyways, I went under another handle then. I—"

"Old-timers who've seen 'em both say Marpane's faster from the holster than Clay Allison of the Washita ever was. He's a plumb great gunman," said Gotch Bell without expression.

"You know about the time the three Warlow brothers had him against the wall down in Tres Pinons, uh course," said Louie.

"Sure," said Bowser. "He only had one gun that night and was wounded too. They buried two of the brothers on the river bank and. . ."

Pelley winked knowingly at Mary Lou. "Won't exactly say I ridden with Cat. But I met up with him a coupla times and—"

Mary Lou fixed him with a cold eye. "You talked to him?"

"I'd still call him an outlaw!" Louie said loudly in argument. "Don't give a hang. He—"

Bowser shook his bald head. "If he stops off here, I'd be powerfully glad to serve him. 'S all I can say. And he might, you know." He was referring to the fact that Cat Marpane had been seen up the creek at Tepee Forks a couple of days ago.

"Wonder could he be in this part of the country after Bo Sebolt?" mused Gotch Bell. He was practically running off at the mouth for him. Bo Sebolt was the head of the Lost Canyon bunch. A posse had cut Sebolt off from his band and he had fled southward into the Badman Hills below Mound City.

"After Bo Sebolt? Aw, your brains are leaking out your head," Louie cried. He was getting orey-eyed fast. With no business in the place he felt free to dump down the redeye. "Wasn't a flock of United States marshals combing them hills for a week? Sure. Naw, Marpane ain't likely to be looking for Sebolt."

The bar boss agreed. "Sebolt probably died in the Badmans. That's happened to more 'n one gent in there. An' him with all that dinero cached away somewheres—and nobody in his outfit knowing where, either." He picked up the bottle. "How about a drink, Miss Mary?"

But Mary Lou was oblivious to his words. Diamond Pelley's gaze had suddenly switched behind her and past, toward a side window of the hall. Her hand on the table edge was clenched so the knuckles were white knobs as she twisted her head to follow his stare. But there was nobody peering in the rain-smeared pane from the alley. Her breath came out in a sigh of relief.

Pelley's hooded eyes had slid back to her, narrowing with suspicion. Mary Lou stretched her high-bosomed body with catlike voluptuousness and smiled.

"You say you *talked* with Cat Marpane?"

"NAW, he ain't a hard-bitten looking hombre," Louie the faro man was holding forth again. "They say he's just plain looking, in fact. Big, of course—and got red hair with a streak of white down the center of it. Acts easy-going and. . . ."

Diamond Pelley leaned close to the girl again. "Talked to him? Sure. More 'n that. I stood right beside him triggering once in a certain gun ruckus at a place I'd perfer not to mention now. And when Cat's guns was empty for a minute," he was lying his head off, to impress the woman, "*I* held the coyotes off!"

Above her sham smile, the open scorn of disbelief flickered in her eyes. Pelley clutched her bare arm as Bowser poured out fresh drinks. "Sure is mighty strange, though, how Sebolt died in the Badmans. They say he was toting plenty of grub when he went in. And he weren't wounded."

"Don't believe me, eh?" Pelley hissed at Mary Lou. "Listen. You heard them saying what he looked like. But they don't know one thing. Listen. I do know it—I been that close to Cat Marpane. He's got a thin

white scar—you can only see it up close—that runs from his lip up to the right side of his nose." He was a wily, glib-tongued one, that Diamond Pelley, quick with the jaw oil. He was lying again, concocting it as he went along to make himself important in the woman's eyes. "I could even tell you how Cat got that scar."

The mockery faded from Mary Lou's eyes then. Her lips parted. "You knew him that well? Why—"

AGAIN Pelley's hooded eyes slid by the back of her neck, and once more Mary Lou turned to follow his stare at the side window that gave on the alley. The color pulled out of the cheeks of her round face. There was a lean handsome face with a black mustache pressed against the other side of the rain-pimpled window. Lugo Valentine. The mustache lifted in a thin smile and he brought his hand up in that half saluting gesture to her. Then he was gone; she jerked the serape higher about her neck to hide the goose flesh on her shoulders.

Diamond Pelley's chair scraped back. "Reckon I'll be leaving. Got some business to tend to first thing in the morning."

Louie broke off his talk to look up, remembering something. "Thought you was heading back for Norcross on this evening's stage, Diamond."

Pelley said he'd changed his plans, would be leaving tomorrow maybe. He hauled on his slicker and said good-night to everybody and let himself out the double front doors. Gotch Bell sat staring at the doors.

"He's got some business up his sleeve, all right. Saw him with a pair of strangers today. Wire-sharp pelicans, they was, too. One of 'em used to be a gunfighter down on the Rio years back. Gent name of Dowty, Shack Dowty." Bell was cramming a month of talking for him into this night.

Neither Bowser nor Louie paid him any heed. Bowser was saying, "Mebbeso Sebolt's still back in the Badmans holed up somewheres."

"Naw! Not a chance. Them marshals combed all the brakes and every last hogback ridge fer him. He's dead. 'Bout as much chance of him still being in there as there is of Cat Marpane sticking his nose in here tonight."

"Cat's a plumb great gunman," said Gotch Bell again, speaking with awe. Talk dropped off as he sat splitting down a matchstick with his thumbnail.

Bong-bing-boom. There was a crashing chord from the tiny piano. The Perfessor had fallen asleep over his poetry book and his head had slipped from his hand onto the keyboard. Their heads jerked toward him.

"Where's the wake?"

Their heads swivelled back the other way. And there he was, standing inside, the door already closed behind him, a big homely faced man with a pleasant lopsided grin. A wet stub of quirly poked up cockily from a corner of his broad mouth. His water-dripping coat was pushed back by the big hands on his hips. It left his ivory-butted Colts revealed. He sort of nodded and pulled off his high-curled-brimmed sombrero to shake the water from it. And there was the white streak running down the center of the shock of red hair. Cat Marpane, beyond any doubt. . . .

HE MOVED barward with an easy slouching movement, stepping lightly for such a big hombre. En route he bumped a chair and table but he didn't seem orey-eyed. Nor even seemed to notice them as he hiked up worn jeans.

"How about some gila spit, gents? And set 'em up all around. . .Pony we's lame. Down at the livery stable, they told me the hotel burned down last month but that I might git a room here." The low voice came from the bottom of the deep powerful chest as he spoke with no apparent motion of his leather-skinned face. The voice was loose and unhurried like the way the man moved, as if nothing nor anybody had ever made him go tense or hurried him.

It was Gotch Bell who came out of the trance first. Jabbing slack-jawed Bowser in the ribs, Gotch

walked over, lean body very straight in his dark blue shirt and skin-tight dark pants. "You're the great Mr. Marpane, ain't you?" He didn't try to shake hands.

Cat Marpane's low laugh rumbled, his thumbs hooked in the wide brass-studded belt girding. Awe-eyed Gotch Bell had already decided to buy himself a belt like that tomorrow. "Just make it 'Marpane,' ranny," Marpane told him. "Right bad night, ain't it?"

They all lined up and had a drink with the affable mysterious gent, all but Mary Lou. She remained at the table. Marpane looked over at her and inquired if the lady didn't drink. Bowser hemmed and hawed, not knowing how she wanted it played. Gotch nodded directly to Cat Marpane. Getting an extra glass, big Marpane took it with a bottle over to the table. He made a bow. Despite the easy-going exterior, there was something compelling about the man.

"Ma'm, my apologies. You're quite right. Licker ain't fit for womenfolk—at a bar. But here. . . ." He slouched his big carcass over one side of the table, winked, and poured her a drink. Mary Lou's pouting face slowly stirred into a smile. "Man comes off the trail, he likes to have a pretty un like you to rest his eyes on."

She giggled softly. Men found it entrancing. The harsh brittle laughter she saved till she was with the other girls. "You're mighty soft-spoken for a man they say is the toughest who ever walked, Mr. Marpane." But she knew he wasn't Cat Marpane; he didn't have that white thread of scar running up the top lip Diamond Pelley had told her about. He was an imposter, cashing in on the coincidence that with the white streak in his hair he resembled the famous Cat Marpane. She'd seen that done before.

"'They say,'" he mimicked her. "Hear a heap of them things about myself too, ma'm. But I never believe a word of 'em." He chuckled.

HER eyes twisted around to that side window giving on the alley as the smile froze on her face. That chill crept down her spine. For a moment she'd had the sensation Lugo Valentine's stare had been fixed on her. But there was no face pressed against the window. She looked back at the man she knew wasn't the dangerous Cat Marpane and a plan began to form up in her mind. Marpane was pouring out fresh drinks, talking about how out on a bleak trail under a lonely moon sometimes a man would think of the women he'd known. Especially a girl like her, young and fresh and sweet.

Lugo had been getting more insistent of late. He'd drop in and lounge up beside her at the bar with those insolent eyes, moving his tall lithe wasp-waisted body closer and closer. "When, Louella? When? I'm getting danged tired of waiting," he'd purred with that nasty note the last time. Lugo called her Louella because, as as he knew, that had been her name before she came to Mound City.

Because he knew, that was why Lugo could scare her. He just had a small horse ranch down on the south road—was far from a big potato in lusty, hell-roaring Mound. Lately he had been hinting around that he had something big afoot, something that was going to get him a chunk of dinero. He was good-looking in a swarthy way; they said he had foreign blood in him. And women found him attractive though he had no money to spend on them. But he knew about Louella and that man who was her husband secretly—and how the man had been found one morning back there in Frazee with a knife between his ribs.

"Fella gits thinking sometimes about the mistakes he's made in his life and—" Marpane was saying when he broke off abruptly. He had been reaching for his quirly on the edge of the table, looking right at it. And he had seared his finger on the hot coal, knocking the smoke to the floor. Marpane's face froze and he looked hard at nothing out in space.

"A woman makes mistakes too," Mary Lou said sadly.

Marpane flashed the lopsided smile "Gal as pretty as you can be forgiven anything she does, ma'm."

He dropped a big arm around her little shoulders.

For a moment she smiled warmly up into his face. Then she drew away hurriedly, a grimace of fear twisting her face. "Be careful, please. There's a man—and—and he's crazy with jealousy. If he sees me even look at another man. . . ."

Marpane reached for her again. "The handle is Marpane, Cat Marpane. . . . 'Course if you're in love with this gent—"

"In love with him?" Her eyes widened in a nice simulation of horror. "I'm afraid of him—scared to death of him." She said it breathlessly. "And he's dangerous. He'd gun a man from behind, Cat!"

"I can take care of myself, thanks, ma'm."

"I can't though." She let the serape slip down from her shoulders, then edged away the strap of her dancing gown to reveal a rip in her white skin. She'd gotten it from a nail in the wall of her room in a hair pulling fight with another of the girls in the place over who had first rights on an orey-eyed prospector down from the hills. "The last time he was jealous. . . ."

CAT MARPANE'S lips flattened hard over his teeth and his insucked breath made a hissing sound. Merciless when tangling with another hombre, never asking any quarter himself, the idea of a man striking a woman did something to him. "I'd sure like to meet up with that polecat a heap," he said slowly, an icy undertone to his voice.

She gave a little laugh. "You'll be riding on tomorrow."

Marpane tapped the table. "Might not, ma'm. That lamed pony of mine could stand a rest."

Over at the end of the bar where he stood watching Cat Marpane's every move, Gotch Bell frowned. He didn't savvy what was going on, but he knew how Mary Lou had gotten that shoulder scratch. Why she should be showing it to Marpane didn't make any sense. . . .

ABOUT noontime the next day, Diamond Pelley cautiously inserted his snipe face in the side door. He sized up Marpane at the bar, then ducked out as if somebody had stuck a hot branding iron under his coat tails. He didn't come around the Pinto again that day, contrary to custom. When Mary Lou appeared for her breakfast, Marpane sat down at the table with her. He was freshly shaven and wearing a new blue silk shirt. But that cowlick over his forehead refused to stay slicked down despite all the water he had slapped on it.

"When this hairpin drops in, ma'm—"

"Lugo. Lugo Valentine."

He nodded. "Lugo, eh. . . . All right. When he shows, give me a signal."

A little worried frown knitted her soft-skinned forehead fetchingly. "There—there won't be trouble, will there? I mean—shooting."

Marpane smiled. "Don't worry. No trouble. Most gents don't crave to crowd Cat Marpane. . . . Say, that java of yours is cold as gullywash. Hey, boy!"

Mary Lou smiled inwardly. Her plans were working out. The big redheaded man wasn't the real Marpane, just a bluffer; so there would not be any real danger to Lugo. She didn't want Lugo hurt; if she could care for anybody, the handsome roguish Lugo was that man. But he would be impressed by the fact that the man everybody took for Cat Marpane was interested in her and protecting her. It would nullify that threat Lugo held over her.

Then if she played her cards right . . . . Well, Lugo was crazy for her, and if he couldn't win the other way, he might offer to marry her. And Mary Lou was tired of the honky tonk business. Stirring her coffee, she made herself look sadly demure.

"It's real nice of you, Mr. Marpane. I don't know how I can ever thank you or—or repay you."

Releasing her hand he had been covering with one of his huge ones, Marpane sat up straight, eyes hard. "You're reading the brands wrong, ma'm. I ain't asking no price."

Gotch Bell stalked over. He already had on a studded gunbelt like Marpane's. "'Morning, sir. Anything

I can do for you?" But when the eyes in his flat tombstone of a face switched to the girl, they had a hostile light.

MARPANE passed Gotch a cigar and they got talking about the mystery of Bo Sebolt's disappearance. Mary Lou could have knifed Gotch with calm delight, too. She'd just been discovering how she could wind the bogus Marpane around her finger. . . . .

It was late afternoon when the dark Lugo Valentine eased in in his usual stealthy way and drifted over to the bar. He crooked a finger at Mary Lou who was listening to the Perfessor play something he claimed had been written by an hombre named Beethoven. She went over obediently. His opening remark surprised her as he let his liquid eyes rove over her figure.

"Howdy, Louella. . . . .Mightn't be seeing you for a spell. Taking a little trip, maybe." He was keyed up, right hand never straying far from his open-topped breed holster, eyes checking on everybody in the bar's back mirror.

"You're going away, Lugo?" That puzzled her.

He pinched her arm with a cruel twist of his fingers to warn her to drop her voice. "Maybe. . . . .Got any idea what that Marpane's hanging around town for? You been talking to him?"

"I—well—" She didn't know how to play it.

Cat Marpane in person settled it for her as he came walking up from the card tables in the rear. "Drink here for the lady and me, Bowser," he ordered the bar boss as he calmly armed away the drink Lugo had bought for her as if he failed to see it. "Anybody annoying you, Miss Mary Lou?"

Lugo's knifelike face jerked and stained deeper with hot color. He flashed a look over his shoulder where Shack Dowty, the gun slick, loll d against a post. Over in a dim front corner, Gotch Bell straightened unobtrusively from a table, body hooked over slightly.

"The girl is with me," he spat out, looking back at Marpane.

"You mean—*was* with you," Marpane told him without even dignifying him with a look. "Ma'm, the air is sorta polluted right here. Suppose we move on." He took her arm possessively and led her to a table. Eyes flashing yellow with fury, Lugo Valentine looked as if he'd bust out of his swarthy hide. He stomped out and Diamond Pelley slid from a tree across the road to join him.

AFTER dinner, Marpane went up to the main street to have a chat with Bartmann, the town marshal. The latter was just about to ride out with his deputies to meet the mine wagons over in the pass to the east as they came through with their monthly silver shipments. So Marpane was back at the Pinto very shortly. Mary Lou had already changed her daring spangled gown for a long-sleeved dress. Big slouching Marpane noticed it only when he stepped over to ask her to dance.

Her eyes twisted away from his big genial ones. "He was here, Lugo. He—he was very mad." She drew up one sleeve to reveal the fresh discolored bruise on her slim forearm. Lugo had been there, slipping in at the back and going to her room and sending word he wanted to see her. That much was true. But he hadn't laid a hand on her; Mary Lou had inflicted the mark herself with a high-heeled dancing slipper.

Marpane stopped dead, beefy face folding grimly. He raked his rumpled red hair with hooked fingers as his eyes roved to check if Lugo was in the place. Lugo wasn't. But Cat Marpane recognized the spider-thin man with the black patch over one eye over at a corner table. At sight of him, Marpane led the girl off the dance floor.

"What's Charlie East doing here . . . . .Chief lieutenant of the Bo Sebolt outfit. This is one dang long way from Lost Canyon," he muttered half to himself. Marpane didn't dance any more that night. He sat over a glass of whisky at a table in the thronged place. And Mary Lou came over and sat with him when she

wasn't dancing with a customer. He wasn't upset; but Marpane was watchful, definitely waiting for som thing to break.

IT was late in the night with the last hangers-on bellied to the bar counter, when it did. It seemed innocuous enough. The girl, seated opposite him, galvanized. Marpane followed her stare and saw Lugo Valentine peering in the window from the alley. The next instant, he was gone. And skeletonlike Charlie East had left the corner and was already passing out the front doors.

"Got to see a man about a horse," Marpane said curtly and was ambling toward a side door giving onto the alley. Lugo was gone from there as he fully expected. But Marpane picked him up going down Whisky Row. Behind him strode lank Charlie East. And trailing East was little Diamond Pelley.

They turned down a cross street away from the main road, the trio keeping that formation, walking faster as they moved away from the business section. Past some dark cabins, they veered off down a tree-shadowed lane that curved toward the shack settlement on the mud flats of the creek where it bowed. Just inside the head of the lane, the trailing Pelley halted. Marpane could tell by the glow of the coal of his cigaret that tinted the darkness faintly.

Immediately the big ace gunman cut between a couple of the houses and cruised across backyards and down into the brush of the open ground close to the lane. From a little ahead came the rattle of Charlie East's spurs. Then Pelley finally came along at a dog trot. Silently Marpane fell in behind him, freezing doubled beside a stump when they cut into one of evil alleys of the river-edge settlement.

When Marpane edged into the alley, dark as a tunnel, he had to work by sound, and the lap of the broad creek made it even more difficult. From behind the shuttered windows of the shacks settlement came low guarded voices, muffled laughter, occasionally the rattle of bottle against glass. From ahead came the splash of water as a boot landed in a puddle. But the silence shut down after that and the alley seemed to have swallowed the trio. Ahead the water gleamed darkly through the reeds on the bank.

Then a wan band of light flashed briefly off to the right where a side-path branched. Marpane whirled to see it disappear at once. It had come from a hurriedly shut door. He checked quickly. It was a larger place than the rest in the shanty settlement, a one-story place that ran back into heavy brush near the creek. Lugo and Charlie East and Pelley had disappeared into it. No sign of life showed from its boarded-up window.

As Marpane speculated, a figure stirred slightly in the shadows between him and the house. And another man betrayed his presence wit a snatch of low whistling across the path from it. If he tried to force his way in, the gun-ace realized at once, those two would give the warning. And while he was dealing with them, the others could easily slip into the brush at the rear. After a few more moments, Cat Marpane returned up the alley.

The flat figure of Gotch Bell detached itself from a dark doorway and followed in his rear. By using a short-cut, Gotch was at the bar when Marpane re-entered the Pinto.

"Have a drink, Gotch," Marpane said when he slouched up.

Gotch Bell had a beer. "Do you really figure Bo Sebolt died back there in the Badman Hills, Mr. Marpane?" he asked respectfully.

Marpane's eyes hooded over his glass. "I *did* figure so."

EVERYBODY was surprised when Cat Marpane remained in Mound City another day. Down at the livery barn, they said his pony had recovered from its lameness all right. But Marpane stayed on. Mary Lou was glad; when she met Lugo on the street, he had a worried look.

"What's that Marpane cooling his heels here for?"

She smirked. "He claims he has

a strong weakness for blue eyes." She rolled hers coquettishly. Lugo spat into the gutter and stalked off.

A little before sundown, he came into the Pinto, eyes bloodshot with whisky and lean face a truculent mask. It was that lull before the night's business bloomed into full life. The place looked like a tawdry old hag awaiting the beautifying veil of night. Lugo came to where Mary Lou sat playing solitaire, feigning she didn't see him. He cursed.

"I thought you were taking a pasear out of town," she said coolly.

He hit the table with a tight fist. "Right soon you're going to be damned sorry you ain't been nice to me, Louella! I'm collecting a pile of chips—blue chips—big stuff. Then to hell with that mangy horse-ranch. I figure to hit south and buy myself a place like this—only better. And—"

Her scornful laughter mocked him. He grabbed her wrist. "Think you're real high and mighty with that Cat Marpane a-hanging 'round you, huh? Well, he'd better be careful, following gents around and sneaking down to—" He broke off as if he'd said too much. "He'd better not hang around you much longer, by grab!"

Mary Lou saw the viciousness that played like fitful lightning across his dark features. She glanced around to see if Marpane was in sight and glimpsed little Diamond Pelley gliding by the window on the alley. "Lugo, don't be a fool! I work here and—" She was happy to see him apparently so jealous, but she didn't want gunplay between Lugo and this bogus Cat Marpane. Lugo was slicker than slobbers out of a holster; if he shot up the imposter, he might be in trouble bad. Bartmann, the new marshal, had served notice he meant to clamp down on the violence in Mound.

"Listen, Lugo. Don't go locoed. Think I'd waste my time on his br—? I—"

"He's the great Cat Marpane, ain't he?"

She shook her red head. "No, he isn't, Lugo. I know that; I've just been stringing him along. He's a tinhorn faker. I *know* he isn't Marpane." She hoped that would cool off Lugo.

"He isn't? You r e a l l y know that? . . . ." He began to grin but evilly. "Then, by grab—"

CAT MARPANE came shambling from his room in back beside Bowser's cubbyhole. He moved faster when he sighted Lugo over the girl. And Lugo Valentine swung to face him with a gloating look.

"You dirty sneaking polecat!" he screamed. "You keep away from my woman and drag your tail outa this town tonight or—"

Without seeming to hurry, some ten yards away, Cat Marpane's big hulk was suddenly in the wide-stanced gunman's crouch. His hands hung over his holsters. He hesitated to draw and compel a showdown because the girl was so close to Lugo if the lead started to fly. That was why Lugo got his .45 out first. Then, with a choked scream, Mary Lou wheeled from the chair and plunged across the empty dance floor.

Marpane's hoglegs seemed to glide out of the scabbards as if spring-propelled, just growing into his capable hands. Lugo's bullet smashed out first. And livid gun flame spotted from the dim stairway where the unnoticed Gotch Bell had been standing halfway down. His slug tore a hunk out of the frame of the side doorway where Diamond Pelley crouched. Pelley turned and dived up the alley.

The great Marpane's weapons churned out lead in a smother of muzzle flame. Gliding backward toward the front doors, somehow Lugo Valentine still lived; Marpane had missed. Lugo was behind a post and firing again. In the doorway back of him appeared Shack Dowty, the Rio gun slick. And Marpane, plowing forward like a great cat, seeming almost to dance on his boot toes, closed. There was something almost frantic to Gotch on the stairway the way the big man tried to get nearer. His right gun thundered. But Lugo, in the open, still stood untouched. And then Lugo fired and the great Marpane was measuring his length

on the floor. Red jetted from the side of his head. . . .

A STUNNED throng jammed Whisky Row in front of the Pinto. It was incredible. The great Marpane had been outgunned, dropped in a lead-swapping duel. Inside they had Cat Marpane propped in a chair as Gotch daubed at the scalp wound with rags and water. Bowser held a glass of whisky to the crack gunman's mouth. There was an ugly raw-fleshed gash over Marpane's ear, but he had only been creased by the slug, not seriously injured. Off a few feet, Mary Lou tried to hide a triumphant smirk. Lugo had fought over her. He wanted her bad as the devil, all right. Lugo himself had ducked out and hustled down the road with Pelley and Shack Dowty at his heels right after it.

With surprisingly gentle hands, Gotch Bell fastened the ring of cloth over the bullet cut. And Marpane stood up, swaying but shaking his head when Gotch tried to reseat him. He signed and they gave him a quirly and lighted it. He inhaled heavily once, then turned back toward his room.

"Can you bring me in some pen and ink and writin' paper, please," he asked heavily. Then he went to the rear and into his room, bumping the doorway heavily in the dimness back there.

Gotch brought the writing material back to him and waited. Seated at the table in the room, Marpane's hand trembled as he prepared to write. He started once, then turned up the lamp and wrote another word. Then he bent closer to the paper to peer at it. He smiled at Gotch and waved him out.

Sweat ran slowly down Marpane's big face from the temples when he'd finished it. He'd never stayed in school long enough for his writing to be very good. He sleeved at his mouth and picked up the letter to re-read it.

Dear Brother Tom, it began. *I might be delayed some gitting back home to Humphreys like I promised. Tell Mom I'll make it as soon as I can. A little unfinished business has turned up, Tom. Mebbe I might never finished it. My eyes have gone pretty bad like I told you in the last letter. Can't see much clear more 'n ten feet away. In case anything goes wrong, I am hereby giving you full title to the ranch, including my half. Also, over in Elk Branch they got a thousand dollars in the bank in your boy's name. I been trying mighty hard to make up for the mistakes I made when I was a wild button. Maybe I have. I hope so. I figgered I could do it better without pinning no tin badge on me. Goodbye and bless you. I almost forgot. That mortgage they give me on their place when your wife's sister needed some money—I burnt it months ago. So-long, Tom.*

Theodore J. Marpane

THERE was a timid knock at the door. Bowser came in with a bottle and a glass. He went wide-eyed when he saw the packed money belt Marpane was stripping from under his clothes. And then the gunman passed it to him.

"If anything happens to me, Bowser, see that Miss Mary Lou gits this afterwards. I know I can trust you. And—and mail this letter for me if —well, you know."

When Bowser came out, the crowd at the front doors wanted to know what Cat Marpane was doing. Everybody knew how the legendary gunman was known to state flatly nobody could whip him with a hogleg. And, also, that if a man was lucky enough to put lead into him, he wouldn't stop hunting him down till he died. But Bowser shook his head; Marpane was doing nothing, he said.

In the backroom, the big gunman carefully worked up the window. A moment after, he was across the sill and walking rapidly across the backyard toward the side road leading down from the town's center. The afterglow of the sun stained the cowtown with a bloody hue that made the outlines of buildings stand out

with unreal clarity. Turning down the lane to the creek-front, Marpane lifted off his sombrero and tossed it into the brush, then hiked at the holsters on the brass-studded belt. He moved into the shanty settlement.

There was something purposeful about the way he bore down on the dank cluster of hovels and shacks. Men turned in doorways, flattened back against buildings as he passed. A woman pulled her head in a window, slamming the shutters after her. It was plain a man was marching to gunplay. Marpane was at the side-path where lay the house he had studied last night. He bore down upon it, then the bullish roar broke from his throat.

"Come on the hell out, Lugo Valentine, and git your damned medicin' Cat Marpane bellowed. The slamming of the front door, shadowed by the tiny porch, was the only answer. "Come out—or I come in!"

"Don't; they'll blast you to bits," a man watching from the opened crack of a door at the corner croaked.

Marpane threw himself down the path, doubled over and zigzagged as he went in. Splashes of gunfire licked from behind the boards of the windows of the old place. Marpane slowed once, slapping a gun-bearing hand to his side. Then he continued driving in, the white ring of bandaging on his head standing out starkly in the increeping dusk. The ivory-butted hoglegs barked in his big hands. From behind one of the windows there was an agonized screech and a loose Colt fell through the aperture in the boards.

LEAPING a boulder, Marpane was in the grass-grown yard. He went down, rolling as the little place seemed to rain gunfire. But when he stopped rolling, he was at the edge of the little porch. Leaping upon it, he sent his heavy shoulders punching into the old paintless door. They couldn't throw down on him where he was. He hit it again, then sent a slug crashing at the lock.

Twisting in his tracks like a cat, he hurdled off the edge of the porch and tore back through the brush to the rear of the place. It was Shack Dowty, just stepping out, who faced him first. Shack's smokepole levered up in a blur and he got it cocked. He died with it that way as Cat Marpane pumped a slug into him at five feet distance. Behind him, little Diamond Pelley, the lying gambler, tried to scuttle back in, but Marpane's slug broke his leg. The great gunman flattened him with a slap of a smoking gun barrel and he crashed past him.

Two shots thundered within the boarded-up place, then Lugo Valentine came flying out the front door and legged it frantically into the path. A smear of red stained half of Marpane's face when he appeared in the front doorway. The fleeing Lugo sensed his appearance and wheeled, dropping to one knee to draw bead. He fired once, twice. And Cat Marpane rushed through the grass of the yard, closing in to where he could see, without firing. Marpane reeled once, and then his left gun pocked the dusk with a livid streak twice.

Lugo rolled onto his back and looked unseeingly at the fresh-risen moon with one eye. There was a hole where the other had been. Panting, Marpane turned heavily back toward the house.

"Cat, wait!" cried the slim Gotch as he ran down the path.

"They got Bo Sebolt in there," snorted Marpane over his shoulder. He stumbled onto the porch and barked at somebody inside. A figure emerged; Marpane seized him and sent him flying out to land in the path on all fours. It was the half-bald, sawed-off outlaw, Bo Se-

A NEW "SILVER KID" NOVEL BY T. W. FORD
"THE GALLOWS BRAND"
IS IN THE NOVEMBER DOUBLE ACTION WESTERN

bolt. Marpane reached inside the doorway and dragged out another man, a little gent holding a bullet-smashed arm. It was the gunman who'd been Shack Dowty's pard. Marpane stood talking to him a couple of moments, then leaned back against the doorway with a crazy laugh. The laugh of a drunken gent —or a dying one.

"They was holding S-Sebolt for—for ransom," he bawled. "Going to sell him back to his own outfit! Haw-haw! They'd jumped him up in the—the Badmans and cached him here and was d-dickering with—with—"

AS the drumfire of hoofs resounded through the shack settlement, he sobered and swung away from the house front. Then a handful of riders, led by patch-eyed Charlie East, chief lieutenant of the Lost Canyon outfit, came piling into the side path. Sighting them, the cowering Bo Sebolt leaped up and rushed toward them.

Marpane tried to get him once and missed. Leaping tigerishly, Marpane was out of the yard into the path and closing on Sebolt, and, at the same time, charging right into the pack of horsemen. Their bullets horneted around him. Sebolt looked back and stumbled. It gave Marpane time to close to within ten feet of him. Marpane's heels dug in, and his twin hoglegs said their piece once more. Rising from all fours, Bo Sebolt, the killer, seemed to break in the middle. He flattened to the mud and rolled over twice, kicking feebly, then he lay inert with the red staining his shirt where his side had been blasted out.

Charlie East went stiff-legged in the stirrups as he leveled on Marpane. The latter took a couple of faltering steps. From the side, Gotch leaped from cover and threw down on the riders. But that time he couldn't save his idol; Marpane succeeded in raising one of his weapons. But when he pulled the trigger, the hammer clinked on an empty shell. And then his bullet-buffetted frame collapsed in the muck close to Bo Sebolt's.

Afterward men said that Gotch Bell went crazy for a few seconds that evening. He leaped right in amid Charlie East and Sebolt's riders, his guns churning unbrokenly. East died before his cleared carcass cleared the saddle, and when the Sebolt men spurred frantically across the creek, there were two other empty saddles amongst them. . . . .

MARSHAL BARTMANN, just back from bringing through the wagon train from the mines, was down there in the shack settlement with his deputies. The gun fighting was over. The horde that had swarmed down from the main town saw them put the body of the great Cat Marpane on a shutter and start to tote it up the hill.

"Got Lugo and another and smashed up Pelley—and then he practically commits suicide to git Bo Sebolt," said one of the crowd. "He was a dead-end gunfighter to the hilt, I say!" He drew off his sombrero as he turned to follow the great Marpane's body back to town.

Nobody noticed Gotch as he glided in the clear moonlight up another byway of the shack settlement. He had lost both his .45's in the furious melee at the finish as he tried to save Cat Marpane. He walked up to the quiet-smiling Mary Lou as she stood looking down at where Marpane had died. Bowser had told her about the money belt. Her troubles were over, she thought.

"I'll buy a drink in his memory when we get back, Gotch," she said.

"When — we — git — back," he echoed, face bleak with grief. Then he had glided behind her and plucked a short-barrelled .32 from beneath his blue shirt. He put it firmly in her back and gestured down passed a burnt-out shell of a cabin toward where the reeds grew highest on the creek bank.

"March," he said with a dry sob in his voice. And he pushed her at the end of his gun down toward the water. Nobody would see what happened down there. . . . .

(THE END)

HOW "BUFFALO BILL" EARNED HIS NICKNAME

A True Story of the West

By Kenneth P. Wood

DURING the late Sixties when the Kansas Pacific Railroad was throwing its steel spine across the plains, it was estimated that between nine and ten millions of buffalo roamed the frontier from the Missouri River to the Rocky Mountains. Goddard Brothers, contractors, had the assignment of feeding the twelve hundred laborers who worked on construction and track laying. In order to keep the big camp supplied with fresh meat, buffalo hunters were engaged, and William F. Cody, then still only a young man, had a wide reputation as an expert bison slayer, hence the contractors were glad to add him to their commissary staff.

Cody's job called for an average of twelve buffaloes daily, for which he received five hundred dollars a month. That was exceptionally good pay in those days, but the work was hard and hazardous. He had to first scour the country for his game, with a good prospect always of encountering hostile Indians instead of bison. Then, when the animals were brought down, it was his duty to oversee the quartering and dressing, and look after the wagons that transported the meat back to camp where the workmen messed.

It was whil in the employ of Goddard Brothers that young Cody earned the sobriquet of "Buffalo Bill,' and it clung to him ever after. He wore it with more pride than he would have done the title of Prince or President. Probably there are thousands of people today who know William Cody only by his nickname.

At the outset he procured a trained buffalo-hunting horse, which went by the unconventional name of "Brigham," and from the government he obtained an improved, breech-loading needle-gun; in testimony of its murderous qualities, he aptly named "Lucretia Borgia."

Buffalo were usually plentiful enough, but there were times when the camp meat supply ran short. During one of these dull spells, when the company was likewise pressed for horses, Brigham was yoked to a scraper. Brigham's indignation can well be imagined for a racer dragging an old horse-car would have as just cause for rebelling as a buffalo-hunter hitched to a work implement in the companionship of stupid dray horses that never had a thought above a plow, a hay-rake, or a scraper.

Brigham expostulated, and in such plain language that Bill Cody, laughing, was on the point of unhitching him when a warning call was heard—the equivalent of a whaler's "Thar she blows!"—that a herd of buffalo was coming over the hill. The horse and the scraper parted company instantly and Cody mounted him bareback, the saddle being in his tent a mile away. Shouting an order to the men to follow with an open wagon in

which to load the meat, he galloped toward the game.

There were other hunters on the plains that day, five officers from nearby Fort Wallace having also spotted the herd, gave chase. They were recent arrivals in this part of the West, and their shoulder-straps indicated that one was a captain and the others were lieutenants. Naturally they did not know "Buffalo Bill," and therefore saw nothing in him but an average-looking young frontiersman in the dress of a laborer, astride a not too handsome mount, which had a blind bridle and no saddle. It wasn't a very formidable looking hunting outfit, and the captain was disposed to be a trifle patronizing.

"HI UP, there,. stranger!" he called. "I see you're after the same game as we are."

"Yes, sir," replied Cody, pulling up his horse. "You see our camp's out of fresh meat."

The officer ran a critical eye over Brigham. "Do you expect to run down buffalo with a crow-bait like that?"

"Are buffaloes pretty speedy?" Cody asked, innocently.

"Speedy?" echoed the captain, "it takes a fast mount to overhaul one of those beasts."

"Does it?" retorted Cody, but the officer did not notice the twinkle in the young man's eye. Nothing amuses a person more than to be instructed on a matter that he knows thoroughly, and concerning which his would-be instructor knows nothing. It was quite evident that every one of the officers had yet to shoot their first bison.

"Come along with us," invited a lieutenant. "We're going to shoot a few just for sport, and all we want are the tongues and a chunk of the tenderloin. You can have the rest."

"Thanks, very much," answered Cody with a covert smile. "I'll trail along after you."

There were eleven buffalo in the little herd that was bounding over the prairie ahead of them, and the soldiers started out as if they had a sure thing on the entire number. Bill Cody noticed that the game had pointed toward a creek, and understanding "the nature of the beast," urged his mount into a gallop to head them off.

As the herd dashed past him, the military quintet was already five hundred yards in the rear, so Cody gave Brigham's bridle a deft twitch, and in several long leaps the trained hunting horse was at the side of the rear buffalo. The next instant Lucretia Borgia spoke, and the animal fell dead. Without even a bridle signal, Brigham was promptly at the side of the next beast, ten feet away. This one, too, fell at the first shot. The maneuver was repeated until the last of the eleven animals went down kicking. Twelve bullets in all had been fired, then the horse, which never wasted its strength, stopped abruptly.

THE officers hadn't even time to sight their guns at the game. Astonishment was written on their faces as they rode up to the prairie Nimrod.

"Gentlemen," said Cody courteously, as he dismounted, "allow me to present you with eleven tongues and as much of the tenderloin as you wish."

"I'll be damned!" exploded the captain. "I never saw anything like that in all my life. Who are you, anyway?"

"William Cody's my name."

"Well, Mister Cody, you certainly know how to knock buffalo over, and that mount of yours has some pretty fine running points, too."

"One or two," smiled the young man.

Captain Thomas Graham—as his name proved to be—and his companions were a trifle irked over missing the opportunity of a single shot at the game, but they professed to be more than repaid for their disappointment in a white man hunting buffalo without saddle or reins. Cody then explained that Brigham knew more about the business than most two-legged hunters. If the first bullet failed, he said, the horse allowed another, but if the second shot

(Continued On Page 94)

The knife-thrower folded up as the Hawk whirled and fired.

BLOOD QUEST OF THE HAWK

By Barry Cord

***The wind** from the desert sang a song of death when Big Jim Tannery finally caught up with the deadly Frank Walker!*

A HOT WIND was blowing off the desert the night the Hawk came to the border hell-town of Laruda. In his faded blue shirt pocket was a cryptic note that read:

Hawk:

Are you still loking for Frank Walker? Come to Laruda. I'll tell you where you can find him.

The note had been waiting in General Delivery, at El Paso. The Hawk jogged into El Paso with the fading sun, read the unsigned note, and swung a weary horse west across the Texas Border into New Mexico, without a moment's rest. He wanted Frank Walker that much.

He changed horses just across the New Mexican line, and two days later he cut across a corner of the sere, sun-blasted stretch known to border-hoppers as the Devil's Territory.

Ahead of him, now, the lights of Laruda shone dim and furtive through the rising dust storm.

The gritty wind was at his back when he entered Laruda with a pair of tumbleweeds that rolled past him into the deserted square. Several jerry-built frame structures loomed over him as he passed, storm doors closed tight against the wailing wind. A lone palm, in the center of the *plaza,* leaned backward over a

wide, wooden trough. Narrow alleys radiated from this dark square, cutting back into a warren of foul-smelling shacks, whose scattered lights probed the murky night. . . . .

The Hawk eased his trail-weary roan to halt before the rack of a dimly lighted structure that had the appearance of a saloon and adjoining stables. The roan snorted tiredly as he quit saddle, and as the big, grim-faced man ran his hand along the high-arched neck his tawny eyes were bleak and watchful on the faded lettering barely discernible above the heavy storm door.

Sonora Joe's Cantina

Memory stirred, briefly, in the gaunt, chill-eyed gunman. Sonora Joe's! Mecca of the worst element from below the Mexican border—where a man's life was cheaply held, and as cheaply thrown away. . . . .

THE big Americano shrugged as he turned to the adobe step. Somehow he had never expected to find the suave, impeccable Frank Walker in a border sinkhole like Laruda.

Yellow glare, spilling through the single grimy window in the cantina, momentarily outlined his black-garbed figure, the hard cast of his weathered face. And in that instant, before his fingers closed on the latch, a muffeld voice called from the murky shadows.

"Big Jim Tannery!"

The Hawk shifted, lightly, pulling his big body away from the revealing light, spinning siwftly about. A long-barrelled Frontier Colt eased into his right fist, almost magically, and his lips were thin and cold drawn as he waited.

A figure formed out of the up-street shadows, ran toward him. A tall, slender figure, wrapped in black lace shawl against the desert wind. A girl!

The Hawk stiffened, his eyes bleak and curious on this girl who had called him by a name lost among the violent years. And for a brief moment a feeling of familarity stirred in him. . . .

Then it vanished as she drew back into the shadows, pulling the shawl closer about her shapely shoulders, up across her face. The pale glow from the window had showed him red daubs of paint on cheeks, the slash of it across full lips.

Dancehal Jane! A smile eased the hardness from the Hawk's eyes. He started to swing away, holstering his gun. "Sorry, *querida*," he said shortly. "Not tonight—"

The girl laughed, brittlely. "You forget faces easily, Jim. Or perhaps I—"

She let her voice fade, and for a moment an uncertain silence fell between them. The tired roan tailing the gritty wind nickered hungrily.

Then the girl's voice came again, tense, now, and hard, as if deliberately forced. "You're still looking for Frank Walker, Jim?"

The Hawk looked at her without emotion. "Yeah," he admitted. But he was thinking, sharply, that this girl must have written the note he found at El Paso—and he wondered, then, how she knew where to find him, and knew, too, that he was looking for Frank Walker!"

The shawl-shrouded girl was vague in the shadows by the cantina wall. But something in the outlines of her slim figure, in the way she looked at him, sent the Hawk's mind to groping along a grim back trail. And again he felt the sense of quasi-recognition. . . .

The girl's voice erased the feeling. It was brittle again, and consciously hard. "Jim—you'll find Walker in the *Black Diamond House*, at the north corner of the plaza. At ten o'clock tonight. If you want him, be there. And—good luck—Jim. . . ."

She turned, swiftly, and was gone, running into the gritty murk before he could stop her. The Hawk did not follow. For a long minute he stood with head bent against the wailing wind, tawny eyes shadowed and thoughtful. Then, as the roan stamped restlessly, he roused, turned toward *Sonora Joe's*.

* * *

THE cantina was low-ceilinged, ill-lighted, thick with the smoke of *marijuana* and sharp with the odor

of spilled *pulque* and *tequila*. Gaudily dressed Mexs from below the Line, sullen-faced breeds, a few thin-lipped Americanos, crowded tables along the east wall. In a corner a slim, hot-eyed Mex youngster with a scar down the length of a brown cheek strummed a guitar, his plaintive rendition of *El Abandonado* going unnoticed in the general rumble of talk.

The Hawk made his way to the bar, conscious of the sudden lessening of noise, the quick, sharp scrutiny of hostile eyes. In that quick silence the youth's plaintive voice was momentarily clear: ". . .*sera por per amo. de Dios.*" Then talk flowed on and above it again, guarded now, and cold with a strained hostility.

Sonora Joe was fat, greasy looking. He had one eye perpetually squinted, due to a knife slash acquired in courting days, and a brace of jet black *mustachios* that curled back to his ear. The scar and the *mustachios* gave him a fierceness in keeping with his explosive nature, but his voice was generally low, soft-spoken, almost agreeable.

He looked at Jim, as the Hawk breasted the counter, and his good eye widened; he cursed, softly, beneath his breath as he edged closer to the short barreled Colt he kept under the bar.

He was big, this Jim Tannery, known north and south of the Rio Grande as the Hawk. His black shirt, fitting tight across his shoulders and chest, revealed the hard bulge of flat muscles. But the way he walked made men think less of his size and more of the dull Frontier butts thonged down on his hips. He had tawny eyes—grim, bleak eyes that continually quested—and behind that quest crouched Death, patiently waiting.

Sonora Joe read this in the other's gaze, and his cursing went soundless, but more fervent. Yet his face was bland, and his voice smooth as he asked: "Tequila, amigo?"

Jim Tannery nodded. He took the hat from his head and with it he beat some of the dust from his coat and pants. He put it back so the wide brim shadowed his eyes, and poured himself a drink.

Sonora Joe watched with his good eye lidded and expressionless. He said, watching Jim toss the drink down: "A bad night, *hombrecito*. Eet ees always so, when the wind she blow from the *deserte*."

Jim shrugged, poured himself another shot of the pale, fiery liquor.

Sonora Joe's glance dropped swiftly to Jim's thonged down guns, and his fat face stilled into brown gargoyle. "Sometimes, *hombrecito*," he insisted, gently, "the wind she blow strange things into Laruda."

Jim's eye met the blank one of the man across the counter, and he grinned, bleakly. "*Si*. Sometimes Death comes out of the *deserte*." He let his right hand drop, casually, to a heavy butt, and noticed the lines that suddenly webbed Sonora Joe's mouth.

"I want a stable for my *caballo*, barkeep," he shifted, easily. "Water an' feed an' a rubdown. But leave my rig on him. I'll be leavin' town tonight."

SONORA JOE nodded, and called to a wrinkled, leathery faced swamper dozing by the bar end. He gave sharp, curse-sprinkled orders concerning the care of Jim's horse, and when he swung back his thick lips were pursed and questioning.

Jim Tannery eyed him coldly. "You have the time?"

Sonora Joe consulted his gold chained timepiece. "Ten past nine, *hombrecito*," he grunted. Then, carefully: "You 'ave beenees in Laruda? No?"

"*Si*." Jim frowned. But inside him something quickened, and in his mind leaped the picture of a suave, easy talking man who had lied, cheated and killed with a callousness that still sent raging fires through Tannery after four undimmed years.

Ten o'clock, the strange girl had said. Was this some elaborate trap? Had that note been bait to bring him here, and the girl but added touch to make of it a certain thing? Something inside him warned it could be so. Yet a strange reluctance stirred in him, at this, and he seemed to

see, floating on the surface of the pale, biting liquor he was drinking, the shadowy features of a girl who had been beautiful despite the heavy make-up. And again the strange tug of recognition pulled at his mind. . .

He shrugged, refilled his glass. Behind him a drunken voice lifted with thick conviction, jarring upon a sullen stillness. "*Si, cabron.* Some day *El Zopilote* weel catch up weeth thees gun rider the Americanos call the Hawk. And then—" The *borracho's* arm swept across the table, spilling the bottle of *pulque* into his companion's lap as he drew a significant finger across his throat. "Thees *El Zopilote* weel do to heem, for what happened in Quatrilla two years—"

His companion silenced him with a string of curses. "*Pelado!*" he hissed. "You want the beeg Americano at the bar to hear—"

The *borracho* sneered. "Let the cursed gringo hear. Some day Mexico weel—"

His loud voice caught, fell to sullen mutter as Jim's gaze hooked on him. His companion fidgeted uneasily. The silence in the room was suddenly tense, menacing.

The old bleak strain was in the Hawk as he stood there, back against the bar, facing those sullen men. But in him another memory had been awakened. *El Zopilote*—the buzzard of Sonora. It was a grim name in Mexico—it was worse in the country north of the Rio Grande.

The Hawk frowned, sensing trouble built up here, swiftly. Then, from somewhere in back of the bar, a woman's voice suddenly shrilled. Through the greasy curtains hiding the back rooms a slim figure in ragged pantalons and dirty camisa squirmed. The brown face of a seven-year-old boy looked up at Jim from the bar end, eyes quick with fright.

Behind him a fat, oily-skinned Mexican woman waddled through the curtains, still calling shrilly, and grabbed for the kid.

The boy evaded her. Instinctively he ran to the big blond stranger at the bar, caught at his scarred chaps, clung. He uttered a short, frightened cry as the woman started for them, and tried to get between Jim's legs and the bar front.

Jim looked down into a pair of strangely blue, terrified eyes, and dropped a reluctant hand to the boy's dark, close cropped head. "Sorry, sonny—"

The woman grabbed the kid with rough hands and pulled him away. Harsh curses jarred from her lips as she cuffed the struggling youngster. The boy's cries died to low whimper as they passed through the curtains.

The Hawk turned to Sonora Joe. And in the inttant before the man's fat face settled to expressionless mould he glimpsed strain in his features—a strange tension muddying a baleful eye.

Warning crawled swiftly through the Hawk's powerful frame, leaving him cold and alert.

But his voice was casual: "Yore kid?"

Sonora Joe nodded. "*Si. Mio nino.*" He smiled, white teeth showing in the smoky lamplight. "My wife—she 'ave *mucho traballo* weeth Chico. Always he no want to go to sleep when Conchita she tell heem." He shook his head sadly, but his good eye was narrowed and watchful, and his right hand was on the bar edge, just above his under-the-counter weapon. "*Si, hombrecito. Mucho traballo.*"

Jim Tannery shrugged. "Yeah. I reckon—"

HE WAS reaching for the tequila bottle when he stopped, let his gaze center on the palm of his hand. There was a black smudge where he had pressed it against the youngster's dark head.

Root dye! The obvious explanation leaped at him, even as he sensed the ominous stillness at his back, the taut look in Sonora Joe's eye, as he, too, saw the tell-tale smudge. Sonora Joe was a liar. That youngster was not his—

The fat cantina man pulled back, and simply dropped down out of sight. In the mirror behind the bar movement showed in the room behind. The Hawk whirled, a gun leaping into his right hand. . . .

A blade leaped and flashed in the

smoky lamplight. The gun in Jim's hand was thundering even as he bent his head. The heavy hafted knife whispered past his face, twanged tautly as it thudded into the bar front.

Across the room the knife thrower was folding up, falling across a table. Jim snapped lead in shots that sent the rest of that motley crew hugging the floor behind overturned tables. And then, in the momentary confusion, he placed a hand on the counter, and vaulted it.

He came down in a swift crouch, scarcely a foot from Sonora Joe's startled, upturned face. The barman had a Colt in his hand, and he was evidently debating the wisdom of rising for a quick shot. The Hawk ended his debate. He came down on flexed knees, and struck out with the empty gun in his fist in the same movement.

Sonora Joe sprawled forward on his face without firing a shot.

Overhead the grimy mirror splintered under the drive of wild flung lead. Bottles crashed and rolled from the back shelves. Lead tore a ragged hole through the pine bar front, driving a splinter into Jim's arm.

The Hawk ran on all fours to the bar end, rose with left Colt in hand, and sent three quick shots into the room as he ducked through the curtains.

He found himself in a dim corridor with curtained doorways flanking him. The kid. He didn't have time to look for the blue-eyed youngster who had clung to him back there by the bar. He cursed, savagely, as he ran down the corridor to a back door.

Gritty sand bit into his face as he plunged out. The back yard was dark as he sprinted across it, cut around a corner of the dark stables, hurled an adobe fence, and cut across open lots where the wind whipped savagely.

Behind him cursing men spilled out into the murky shadows. . . .

* * *

THE Black Diamond was a big, two story frame structure at the north corner of the plaza.

The Hawk paused on the top step, swinging his gaze over the deserted, storm lashed square. A thin smile touched his bandanna muffled lips as he dropped his hands down to reloaded guns. Sonora Joe's gun-jackals were looking for him along the river. . . .

Turning, he pulled the dusty neckerchief from his face, and pushed open the foor for his rendezvous with death.

The gambling hall was big, better lighted than Sonora Joe's place. But the same tension fell like a chill breath over the length of that big room, and the drone of the faro dealer's voice was sharp in the sudden silence. In a corner, standing over a poker player's shoulder, a girl laughed, shrilly, barely veiling the strain of near hysteria.

The Hawk's glance went to her, and passed on. It was not the girl who had invited him here.

The dealer's voice broke tonelessly in the stillness, easing the momentary strain. "Place yore bets, gentlemen."

Jim's eyes lingered on the group about the faro table, the hardcases at the poker games. Moving on, his gaze suddenly narrowed. But his stride remained smooth and unhurried, and his brown face impassive.

A lone figure was drinking at the bar. A lean, stoop-shouldered Mex, as tall as the Hawk. He had his back to Jim, and he did not turn, made no motion of any kind. Yet Jim sensed strain creep into the man's stringy shoulders—and in the long mirror behind the pine bar he glimpsed a pair of beady eyes watching from under a wide brimmed, anthill sombrero.

The Hawk's glance shifted from him, to the thin faced gent sidling up to him across the counter. The man had an apron about his lean waist, but he was no bartender. Sallow-faced, cold-eyed, he watched Jim across the counter.

His voice was wary: "What you drinkin', stranger?"

The Hawk took a silver dollar from his pocket, and spun it across the counter. "Rye," he said evenly.

But his face was tight, and in him

was the knowledge that he had walked into a gun trap. The very stillness in the big room attested to that.

THE bartender slid a bottle and glass up to him, and tossed the coin into a box under the counter. He was watching Jim, his lips thin and bloodless, when a door creaked open up on the balustraded balcony.

The wiry Mex with his back partially turned to Tannery did not move. He was staring down into his glass, brooding, a curl of smoke from a dangling cigaret rising over his face.

A girl came to the edge of the railing, and looked down at Jim. It was the same girl who had called him by name in front of Sonora Joe's. But she was without paint, now, and the light was full in her white face. Her slim figure was taut inside the tight-fitting black gown worn by the painted entertainers of the border resorts, and across her bare arm the shawl hung, hiding completely her right hand.

The Hawk's eyes caught the picture of her, but his mind was jogging back across the barrier of a year. Back to pleasant memory of a cottonwood shaded yard, the lazy sprawl of outbuildings in the morning sun, and this same girl smiling, in bright gingham dress, waving goodbye—of a tow-haired youngster by her side, hand uplifted—and a blunt faced cowman who had shaken his hand.

Lorrine Hastings! The name flashed into his head. Eldest daughter of grizzled Buffalo Joe Hastings, whose big Lazy H spread dominated the grass ranges across the San Pedro.

Memory shuffled up another picture, of the day he had come riding into the yard of the Lazy H, grim and haggard, with a red sun riding low at his back. He had needed a stake, and the Lazy H had hired him. He had worked for Hastings six months, and then the old savage urge within him had sent him wandering again. . . .

But he still remembered a night on the shadowed veranda of the big adobe ranchhouse when he had told this dark-eyed girl, with strange unreserve, of his long quest.

All this came to him, in that still moment—and then it was gone. And in him was only hate, dark and bitter, rising swiftly to his face.

For a figure was moving up beside this girl who had chanbged so—who had helped in his trapping. A lean, black frocked, dark faced man with long sideburns, a wisp of black mustache under a thin acquiline nose—a man who placed pale hands on the railing as he looked down at Jim Tannery.

That man was his brother-in-law, Frank Walker. . . .

It was five years since he had last seen the man. Jim had been Walker's best man, at his sister's wedding. Suave, smooth talking, impeccable Frank Walker—gentleman from Georgia, who had married an innocent, blue-eyed, trusting girl and then drove her to her early death of a broken heart. Who had callously murdered Jim's invalid father to gain possession of the modest Triple T ranch, and then sold it while Jim, young and wild and restless had been away, trailing north with a cattle drive, carousing in Fort Worth and Abiline.

Nothing had been left when he had returned home—save the two new graves beside the older one of his mother. And a grim story he had pieced out. . . .

Tannery's sneer was suddenly savage in the smoky lamplight.

WALKER laughed. It was a grating sound, mockingly triumphant. "I got tired of running, Jim. Tired of having you barking at my heels. So I stopped, and waited."

The silence was utter. The sound of the desert wind wailing against the windows was like a grim dirge. One of the two big lamps guttered, and the sound was raspy in the stillness.

"This is the end of the trail, Jim." Walker's tone held a deadly chuckle. "Your trail!"

The Hawk took a short pace out from the bar, seeing only that mock-

ing face on that balcony, feeling only the dark hate of four long years well up in him.

The soft, sibilant voice at his elbow was like a discordant note—

"*Cigarillo, amigo?*"

The *stoop-shouldered* Mex had turned, a *marijuana* smoke extended in his left hand—and the Hawk suddenly realized with sharp bitterness, the extent of the trap he had walked into.

His glance moved down over the tall, stringy figure. A red sash accentuated a wasp waist, a bonehandled knife lay in a sheath at his middle, a black butted Colt hung low at his right hip. A sharp, red brown countenance, as predatory as any bird of prey, as sinister and savage as the *tierra caliente* that had spawned him—*El Zopilote*, the buzzard of Sonora.

Up on the balcony Walker laughed. "You walked into it, Jim, like a fool. You followed a message *I* sent you, and believed a girl!"

By his side Lorrine was a still figure, staring down at Jim.

El Zopilote's voice was thin, dry as the sand that whispered against the windows. "You are a beeg man, Jeem—*norte* of the Line. *Un malo hombre.*" His beady eyes seemed to flame in their black depths as he opened his fingers, an dlet the *marijuana* cigaret drop. "Two years I wait for you to come back to the Border, to pay you for what happened in Quatrilla. For the hombre whose neck you broke, at the bar in *El Toro's* . . ."

Jim was smiling, bleakly. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw the bartender tip slightly back, and he knew it was coming. And knew, too, that though *El Zopilote* would die, he would not live to kill the man he had hunted for four years.

He drew with that realization sickening him—drew without pivoting, without losing time in needless sidestep. Drew with the striking motion that had earned him the terrible nickname of the Hawk along the trails north of the muddy Rio Grande.

THE white-faced girl on the balcony saved his life. Jim Tannery's eyes retained glimpse of a gun suddenly flaring through the black shawl, lashing down at him. And behind the bar the thin faced killer grunted, gun in hand, and fell back against the shelves. . . .

The gun in Jim's right hand spun *El Zopilote* around with the leaden slap. The Mex killer teetered, gun in hand. Jim's second shot, like a prolonged sound of the first, bunched him in a tight knot. He was falling, dark face twisted with strange numbed surprise as Jim tilted his smoking muzzle to the overhead light and sent it crashing.

Down by the gaming tables hard-eyed men burst into belated action. A lone girl, up on the balcony, had changed the smooth working of a death trap to a free-for-all, and up by the bar the Hawk was loose, twin guns spuming their answers of death. Confusion scattered that bunched group by the tables.

The Hawk jumped lightly over *El Zopilote's* squirming figure, his gaze lifting to the semi-dark balcony. The sharp red flares from Lorrine's shawled hand sent the second huge light to teetering crazily, before it spilled. . . .

Darkness dropped like a shroud. Somewhere on the floor a bluish flicker suddenly puffed into red life—and spread with uncanny swiftness over the dried pine flooring.

Jim ran for the stairs. From the balcony a girl screamed—and it seemed to give wings to his feet.

The fire was spreading fast over the oil splattered flooring, licking hungrily up tinder dry support posts. Men were cursing in the flickering glare, shooting by guess.

Jim climbed those steps four at a time. Lead whammed into the wall at his side, kicked up slinters under his feet. A swift sear across his left leg nearly dropped him.

But he made the balcony still upright, and ran along it, a gun cocked in his fist, a savage, murderous hate beating in his heart. Smoke was thickening up here under the ceiling, red tinted by the rising flames.

"Lorrine!" He called the name,

sharply, remembering the scream he had heard.

He hard no answer. A door was open on his right, and he swung into it, his big body tight, crouched over. At the far enbd of the room a figure moved. Jim called: "Lorrine!" and the figure whirled, slammed a slug that ripped into the framing by Jim's face. Then a door slammed, and the figure was gone.

Jim crossed the dark room, stumbling over a chair, colliding with a wash stand. The crash of the earthen pitcher was barely audible above the roaring of the fire in the barroom below.

He reached the spot where the wiry figure had vanished, and found a door that let directly out to back stairs landing. The wailing wind flung sand against his savage face as he stepped out, gun cocked. . .

DOWN in the yard a lone figure was cutting around the corner of the burning building. Jim knew it was Frank Walker, getting away. A bitter curse leaped to his lips. Four years to get this close to the man who had brought tragedy into his life, and set him on a long, dark trail. Four grim years. . . .

But thought of Lorrine Hastings held him. And in that moment, as he realized she must still be somewhere within this building that was going up like a roaring bonfire, he knew she meant more to him than Walker, more than the savage hate he had nursed through the years.

He was turning even before the full realization reached home to him, plunging back into the dark, smoke filled room. He pulled his neckerchief up over his face, and stumbled to the balcony. Flames were licking along the railing—one end of the balcony, over by the stairs, was sagging—below, the room was an inferno.

"Lorrine!" His voice was harsh behind the muffling cloth. "Lorrine!"

He found her groping along the balcony where Walker had left her, her bare right shoulder dark with blood, her hair tumbled in dishevelled black mass over her face. He bent over her, relief easing the dry pain in his throat. Under them the balcony swayed, ominously. Flames scorched his face. He lifted her, easily, held her face buried against his chest. She moaned, softly, and went limp in his arms.

Jim had only a blurred remembrance of his passage through the smoke filled room, of stumbling again over obstructions, of lungs choked and burning. But he made the back stairs, and went down into the howling wind that tore at them with gritty fingers.

He kept on, across the yard, quartering wide, and when he finally sank down to rest he was on the outskirts of Laruda, in the windbreak of a small, deserted 'dobe shack.

JIM let the girl down, slowly, and she stirred, moaned again. He said: "It's me, Lorrine—Jim Tannery," and his voice was husky with relief. "Lie quiet while I see how badly you are hurt."

The girl lay still, back propped against the shack side. He bent over her, shielding her from the occasional wind flurry, and scraped a match. The tiny flame winked uncertainly, flared bright for a moment, then went out.

But Jim had seen the bullet gash across her arm. the lumpy coagulation of blood forming about it, and he nodded with quick relief. "This'll do till I can get you to a doctor, Lorrine," he said gently, binding the gash with a clean handkerchief. "Rest easy, while I scout around for a couple of cayuses."

"Jim!" The girl's voice was a low whisper. Her face, black smudged and pained, looked up at him. "Jim—Walker—got away—"

Jim's lips went tight. He did not answer at once. Then he shrugged. "Yeah. But I'll find him again—some time!"

There was regret in Lorrine's tone. "I'm sorry, Jim. I know how much you—" She went silent, while Jim stared out across the wind swept stretch of earth between the hut and the dark tracery of vegetation that marked the river.

Jim's voice held a curious note as he turned back to her. "It must have

been somethin' very important to bring Lorrine Hastings to Laruda, dressed and painted like a honky-tonker. Set her to wait for me by Sonora Joe's—"

"Jim!" There was pain in the girl's voice that was not altogether caused by the throbbing of her gashed arm. "Jim—you must hate me for what I did, but I had to do it. I thought Walker didn't know who I was, and when he asked me to wait for you—to give you a message, in exchange for information concerning little Stevie—I did. You see, Jim, my brother was kidnapped, three weeks ago—"

"Stevie!" Jim's mind cut back to Sonora Joe's, to a blue-eyed boy who had looked up at him with terrified gaze—whose hair had been died black with root dye.

The girl nodded, miserably. "Yes. Vanished, without a trace. Father nearly went crazy. Then the note came, demanding twenty-five thousand dollars in gold, to be dropped by a rider under the big palm on the edge of the Devil's Territory. There was a warning that if dad attempted to halt the man who would come for the money, he would never see Stevie alive again."

The girl's shoulders shook. "We dropped the money, but Stevie was not returned. We didn't know where to look, where to turn. Every man on the Lazy H was crazy to follow dad into every town along the Border, and wipe it out if necessary. But that way we would be striking blindly, and no doubt cause the death of my brother so much quicker. I finally talked dad into letting me come to Laruda, as a honkytonker from Fort Worth. If anything was known of Stevie along the Border, I could learn of it here. . . ."

Jim said, gently. "You got work in the Black Diamond, an' Walker found out who you were. He used you, to bring me here, into the trap he had set—"

The girl nodded. "We've both lost, Jim. You and I. Walker's gone—and little Stevie—"

"No!" Jim was on his feet, his lips tight. "Walker's gone, maybe. But perhaps we'll still find Stevie!" He looked down at her, his fingers plucking at cartridges in his belt, reloading the heavy weapons at his hips. "Sit quiet, Lorrine!" he said, sharply. "I'll be back!"

The girl watched him vanish into the gritty murk.

THE sky over the center of Laruda was red. The dry wind drove the flames in sheets across the square, and a barn and a squat, low structure were blazing, adding to the brightness. Cursing men with buckets ran through the howling wind to fling a futile splatter of water into the crackling blaze.

The Hawk ran tirelessly through the sand veil. Sonora Joe's loomed up ahead. Even this far from the square the fire cast a red glow that lit up the squat adobe structure.

The Hawk peered through the grimy window. The bar was dark, and evidently deserted, though a faint lamp glow shone through the curtained doorway at the far end of the room.

Jim pulled back, and edged into the narrow alley. The short slam of a .38 stiffened him against the dark wall, a Colt snapping into his fist.

There came no further shots. The wind mourned sullenly through the alley. Up ahead a yellow glow showed against the dark.

The Hawk stalked forward, gun in hand. The glow came through the open doorway of Sonora Joe's stables. Jim eased forward, slowly, and suddenly stopped.

A voice drifted with the wind. ". . .one less to split with. I never fancied tyin' up with the greaser, anyhow. But this kid. . .kill him, now. He'll only be in the way. . . ."

Jim edged forward. He could see into the stable, now—see a man tightening a cinch on a nervous gray horse. The man was short, very broad, dour-faced. A pair of Colts hung low down on his hips. The Hawk recognized him as one of the men who had been in the Black Diamond.

Then a voice answered, from beyond Jim's view. A voice that brought him up, stiffly—sent a savage light flaring in his eyes. Walk-

er's voice. . .hurried and bitter. "Don't be a fool Gurtie. The kid's our only hope to get away. The Hawk didn't die in that fire; he's loose in town, somewhere—and he'll be on our trail again. But he'll quit, if I let him know the boy'll die." His voice rasped. "Lorrine Hastings means that much to him."

Gurtie shrugged. "I still don't like it, Walker." He looked down at something on the floor, and his lips twisted. "You talked Sonora Joe and his men into the Hastings play. You made a ten-thousand-dollar split on the deal. Then you come back, kill Sonora Joe, and take over the rest of the Hastings' ransom money.' Gurtie's tone held a grudging admiration. "You win all around on the deal. Why not let well enough alone?"

Jim's smile was a mirthless thing as he eased up to the stable door. Walker's voice sounded above the mourning wind. ". . .running this partnership, Gurtie. You got your split; we can ride different trails, from here!"

"Suits me!" the other snapped. He started to lead the gray outside, his left hand moving to lift his neckerchief up over his dour face. He stopped, staring at the dark, grim figure who seemed to materialize out of the red, shifting glow of the murky yard.

THE scene in the stable lasted that way for a bare instant. Gurtie, with his right hand tugging at the gray's reins. . .farther back, nearer the dim glow of a storm lantern set on a box, Walker stood, the suavity stripped from his handsome face, and fear livid in his eyes. Between them the fat carcass of Sonora Joe lay. And close to Walker, tied hand and foot like a small bundle, was Steve Hastings.

Walker said one word. One word that carried all the fear of long, hidden years in the terrible dryness of it. "*Jim*!"

Then he was reaching upward into his coat for the .38 that nestled in shoulder holster, and Gurtie was hunching forward, hand dropping swiftly for his holster gun.

The flat roar of three shots lashed through that dim lighted stable. The gray reared, whinnied fearfully. In the back stalls other animals plunged about.

Slowly, as if fading with the abrupt Colt smashes, Frank Walker sank down. He hesitated on his knees, staring at the grim figure in the doorway with surprised and strangely clear eyes. Then he coughed, shortly, with blood in his throat. He fell across Sonora Joe's unmoving legs.

The gray minced back from Gurtie's still figure. In Gurtie's hand a long barreled Colt still trickled smoke.

Jim Tannery moved slowly toward the squirming, crying youngster. Low down on his right side blood began to glisten against the dusty blackness of his shirt. His mouth was grim-lined, but his eyes were clear and cold as he stepped over Frank Walker's body.

For a brief moment he seemed to see clear, smiling blue eyes merge into the silent headstones over two graves. Then it was gone and he was bending down, cutting the boy loose.

The youngster cried in his arms. He walked to the back of the stable, and in one of the stalls he found his roan, saddled as he had ordered. He lifted himself into the kak, with the youngster before him. The roan's hoofs pounded the earthen floor as he turned. He caught the gray's reins as he rode into the red glow. .

FROM the edge of the Devil's Territory they looked back on the burning town. The flames were still bright against the dusty sky. . .

Laruda would remember for a long time the coming of the Hawk!

Lorrine Hastings, astride the gray, looked up into Jim's hard face. Little Stevie was asleep, his face buried against Tannery's chest.

"Jim—what are you thinking?" the girl said, softly.

The vision of a dark, grim trail through the years vanished slowly in Jim's mind. And across a pleasant valley he saw a rambling adobe ranchhouse, with ollas on the pun-

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The lariat caught Jim by surprise!

LAST LAUGH FOR A LAWMAN

By Richard Brister

The simplest way to break a lawman is to make him look ridiculous to everyone!

IT WAS weeks since he had slept really soundly. The first thuck-thuck of hoofbeats in the street

below brought him lurching up from under the blankets, his eyes wide, staring intently out the moon-washed window.

There was urgency, something like desperation, Jim's trained ears told him, in the way that rider below was pushing his mount. He heard the pounding onrush of more riders, sweeping down toward him. Cogs clicked into place in his mind. He leaped across the room in stockinged feet, groped for his peg-dangling guns.

He was hunched down at the open window, both guns cocked and ready, when the main body of riders thundered in a dusty stampede below.

"Muley!" Jim snapped the word like an epithet over one shoulder. "Wake up! You'd sleep through an earthquake!"

Across the room, the fat deputy quit snoring, g r u n t e d sleepily. "Huh? What is it?" and then started snoring all over again when Jim didn't answer.

Jim groaned inside. No sheriff ever had to work under a handicap like his, with only sluggish, slow-thinking Muley Thompson to help him.

"It's Tanner," Jim bit out acidly. "Fels Tanner! He's cracked Saul Horgan's bank, just like he threatened." But Muley's only response to this information, which should have aroused any self-respecting lawman to a climax of excitement, was a series of throaty grunts, and continued snoring.

Jim swore in his throat. Carefully, sighting with difficulty in the moon-washed half-night, he pulled trigger on one of the riders sweeping past in a haze of dust on the street below him.

The big Colt bucked, spitting flame and lead death at the rider down there. In the confines of the room, the explosion sounded like some sort of a mine blast.

Muley's startled voice, across the room, held a plaintive note. "What the—Jim, what're you doin'? A hell-uva time t' be blastin'—"

Jim didn't listen. He had aimed for the heart, had seen the rider lurch as the slug struck him. The man wavered in the saddle, then righted himself, clutching one shoulder. He raced on down the street with the rest of Fels Tanner's gang, but the man was hard hit, Jim knew.

"Nailed one of 'em," Jim said tersely. He had slept in his clothes, and now he hurriedly yanked high boots over his stockinged feet. He strapped on his gunbelt. "That'll slow 'em some, I reckon. I'm ridin', Muley. If you can stay awake, follow. But by golly, somethin' tells me *this* time I'm gonna find Tanner's hideout!"

He was through the door, halfway downstairs, when Muley called in his worrying voice: "Man, you're crazy; he'll kill you. That's all he wants, to get you ridin' out there alone on his trail. Wait for me, dammit!"

"Sorry," Jim said. Every second was a thing to be measured out; every fleeting moment that passed could swing the balance for or against him. "I haven't got ten minutes, Muley. Take you that long to wake yourself up."

JIM had the saddle on Spanky, his gray gelding, and was riding out of town on Fels Tanner's trail in less than three minutes. He had been expecting Tanner to strike, and had been ready for him.

Fels Tanner was a six-and-a-half-foot, black-bearded owlhooter from down Texas way. The Rangers had made things too hot for him down there. A year ago, he and his organized gang of cutthroats and thieves moved in on Dawes County, killing, stealing, flaunting their renegade power in the face of Dawes' peaceful gentry, and in the face of their sheriff, Jim Blanding.

Dawes was wild, still-unexplored country. Tanner had a hideout back in the foothills of the Vegas. Try as he might, Jim had never been able to trace the owlhooter to it.

As time rolled on, and he still failed to bring Tanner to bay, Jim's long, lean face creased with lines of growing concern. The list of the outlaw chieftain's trepidations piled up higher and higher. The folks of Dawes County began to whisper angrily that they had made a poor choice in electing Jim sheriff.

Spanky rattled up the main street of Dawes at a bone-rattling clip. Jim swerved right at the edge of town. He could read sign on Tanner's gang in the moonlight. He leaned forward a bit, whispering gently into the gelding's right ear. The horse snorted softly, and settled into a ground-annihilating lope.

"This time, old fellow," Jim muttered. "This time, Spanky. That man we drilled in the shoulder'll hold 'em up some. Tanner's a thievin' skunk, but he won't risk leavin' a man behind. And if anyone can overhaul 'em, you can do it."

The horse nickered, as if understanding. Jim peered uptrail, his black eyes burning. He was thinking of big Fels Tanner, of the man's giant strength, his preening, peacock arrogance, of the way Tanner had gone out of his way to make a fool of him, Jim Blanding.

Two weeks ago, Jim had received a letter from Fels Tanner. It had come to the young sheriff through regular channels, had been mailed in Encito, a trail town fifty miles to the east, and it had said:—

Blanding: In case you're interested, I'm holding up Saul Horgan's bank, some time in the next couple weeks. I wouldn't tell you this, like a damn fool, only my boys crave some excitement. Me too. If you was any kind of a lawman, you'd've given us some trouble before now, I reckon. See what you can do when we tell you beforehand the next place we're strikin'. Fels Tanner.

Jim had read the thing through several times, gritting his teeth at the overwhelming conceit behind such a message, the flaunting arrogance of it.

His first impulse was to go right down to see old Saul Horgan, show him the note, and arrange to set up a guard at the bank, day and night. Maybe a good idea, too, would be to have Saul transfer most of his ready cash somewhere out of Dawes, for safekeeping, till the two weeks were over.

But thinking about that, he wasn't so sure. What *was* Tanner's real game? he wondered. Try to get Saul's money out of town, and Fels Tanner might be lying in wait downtrail to pull a more effortless, more convenient robbery of it.

And again, Jim thought, Tanner might be simply trying to keep Jim occupied, here in town, while he pulled off some *other* big job. Tanner was no fool, writing that note. He had certainly suceeded in putting Jim on a bed of pins and needles for two long weeks, and a lawman needs strong nerves and a steady gun hand, for his endless battles with men like Tanner.

Anyhow, Jim had played a pat hand, kept mum about the note he'd received. A very serious mistake, that had proved. Because a day later, Saul Horgan himself came storming into Jim's office. Horgan was a thin, stoop-shouldered man with bright small eyes, and aggressive manners. He was holding a sheet of unlined paper.

"Got any news for me, Sheriff?" he asked abruptly.

"News?" Jim asked slowly. "What sort of news, Saul?"

"Just news," said the banker. "And don't stall around with me, blast it."

JIM'S jaw jutted. "No, I don't have any news for you, Horgan. Why should I? And if I did, why should I hold out on you?"

"That's easy enough answered, Sheriff," the banker exploded, his small arms waving. "I got a note here from Fels Tanner. Says he's gon a rob me, in the next two weeks, the cocky son. Says he wrote you yesterday, tellin' you all about it. What I want to know, Sheriff, is how come you didn't tell me about it? Could be you're afraid folks'll laugh at you, hey? You wouldn't like that, bein' sheriff, now would you? Or maybe you just don't give a damn about what happens to my depositors' money."

"Don't talk like a fool, Horgan."

"I'm talkin' more sense than you care to admit, I reckon. All I'm askin' you, Blanding, is: did you or did you not receive a note from Tanner, sayin' he was going to rob my bank?"

Jim sighed wearily and shrugged his wide shoulders. "An' if I did?"

" hat's the same as admittin' it, then," Saul said excitedly. His small eyes hardened. "You let him get awa, with this, Blanding, like he's threatened, and I'll tell the whole county just what happened. You're duckin' your responsibility as sheriff, and when a man does that, he's not much use, I reckon. Good day to you, Blanding." The small, bent figure wheeled toward the door.

"Wait—" The banker paused. Jim went on: "You'll keep it quiet, providing your bank isn't robbed, or providing I can nab Tanner?"

"Providing," the banker said heavily, "you can protect the townspeople's money. I'm not going to accept responsibility for your failure, Blanding, if Tanner gets away with the bank's money."

That was how they had left things, and later, when Muley Thompson waddled in from the Mud Puddle saloon down-street, Jim had explained the whole setup.

Muley ran fat hands through his unkempt brown hair and gawked at Jim. "Ain't you gonna tell Saul t' move that money?"

"No," Jim said thoughtfully. "I have a notion that's what Fels Tanner wants."

"And you ain't gonna mount a guard at the bank, till the two weeks is up?"

Jim shook his head. "No. Folks'd jrst laugh, if I did. The whole story would have to come out, then. I'd lose all prestige, as a lawman, and I have a notion that's another thing Fels Tanner wants. A sheriff without plenty of folks pullin' for him, willin' to help him out when it comes time for man-huntin', is no threat to the owlhooters. Tanner's smart, Muley; he knows that. Maybe that's what he's up to."

"Could be," Muley said slowly. "But if you don't do nothin' t' stop him, an' he succeeds in the holdup, your name is still mud around here, Jim." He made a wry face. "This is a helluva setup. If we could only locate that big devil's hideout. . . ."

"Maybe we can. We're in a pretty bad pocket, Muley. But there may be a way out. Only—if and when Tanner strikes, we've got to be ready to move—and move fast!"

NOW, as Spanky's long loping stride carried him swiftly after Fels Tanner's gang, Jim could congratulate himself on the way things had worked out.

Tanner *had* made good his threat to strike at Saul's bank. But Jim was hot on his trail, and Tanner would make slow, grudging progress toward that hideout, with a wounded rider.

In ten minutes, Jim topped a rise. The first gray light of dawn was rising in the east, and about two miles uptrail, he could make out a low-hanging dust cloud. That would be Tanner's gang, surely. The cloud swerved toward the right, the foothills of the Vegas. Jim clucked to the gray, and the beast responded, sensing the urgency in Jim now.

Down a twisting, rock-studded trail to the foot of the ridge, around a sudden turn to a tiny sand-strewn basin, his willing mount raced. He went under a scrub oak, lickety split . . . and he did not see the dangling riata until it had dropped neatly around him.

His heart froze, and he reined in hard on Spanky. The horse dug both forefeet in hard, but could not stop quickly enough on such uncertain footing.

The loop had fallen upon him from the height of the tree. It stretched taut behind him, yanked him bodily, somersaulting over the gray's rump. He rolled in the sand, yanking a hand free to snatch at his gun.

A heavy voice warned: "I wouldn't, if I was you, Blanding."

To the right, a figure appeared from behind a huge boulder, a gigantic figure with wide greenish eyes, gap teeth, and a matted black beard. It was, Jim knew almost without hesitation, none other than Fels Tanner.

His half-drawn gun remained in leather as he looked down the ugly muzzle of Tanner's levelled six-gun. He said wearily, "Your play, I reckon, Tanner."

Tanner grinned toothily. "Come down outta that tree, Ferg. You done a nice job o'hawg tyin'. Meet Sheriff Jim Blanding."

A small, wiry figure dropped from the tree. The man made a grimace at Jim, chuckling. "Don't reckon he'll be so pleased t' meet me, seein' I roped him."

"Take his irons," Tanner commanded.

Jim's left arm was pinioned against him by the loop Fergus had thrown around him. He stood stolidly, gritting his teeth, feeling the gentle tug at each hip as his guns were removed from behind. He felt like a fool, allowing himself to be easily caught in the big owlhooter's net. But he had been so intent on that dustcloud up ahead.

He had assumed, naturally, that after cracking Saul's bank, Tanner would beeline for his hideout. That the big man would have the audacity to stay behind with only one man, to set a trap for him, had never entered Jim's mind. He said weakly:

"So you cracked the bank, and you've taken the sheriff. It's a big night for you, Tanner."

Tanner's rough voice boomed at him. "You bet. The bank was a cinch, and so were you, Blanding. You ain't too smart. I figured you'd be ashamed to tell anyone about that note I sent. Sorta tied your hands, hey? Couldn't take any precautions without makin' a fool of yourself. An' that's just how I had it figured."

JIM shrugged. "Where do we go from here?" He had his own ideas. A thrust of cold rage burned within him. Tanner was probably going to blast him to death with that levelled six-gun. He wondered how long he could hope to stall the outlaw. He wondered bleakly, too, how Muley Thompson was doing. Muley was so blasted slow, hard to get started, hard to keep going. There was a fair sign for Muley to read, if he would only make a real effort to follow.

Jim said, peering uptrail to the fast receding dustcloud, "They're swinging over toward Saul Horgan's ain't they? Figure he's got some money cached out there, Tanner? Or maybe you didn't make out as good at the bank as you'd hoped to."

"They're doublin' back," Tanner said gruffly. "Don't think I'm fool enough to take a straight line trail to the best little hideout in this county, do you? And I did all right at the bank. I always do all right, Blanding."

Jim shrugged and lapsed into gloomy silence. Finally he said, "If you mean to blast me, why in hell don't you do it? Killin's no chore to you, from all I've heard. If you—"

"Maybe," said Tanner, "I don't mean to kill you, Blanding. Maybe I don't have to. I don't kill lawmen less'n I have to; it's a bad business. I run into some trouble, that way, with the Rangers down in Texas." He was stroking the black beard, musing. "No, I ain't gonna blast you. All I'm goin' t' do is thrash hell out of you."

Jim's eyes burned with sudden hope. "Talk sense. What in the—"

"Look, I cracked the bank like I'd told you I was goin' to, didn't I? Saul's goin' to scream his greedy head off about it. And when you show your face back in Dawes—all beat to a pulp from an unsuccessful attempt to get that money. . .well, figure it out for yourself, Blanding. You're through, as a sheriff."

"You—you mean you're gonna give me a fair chance? You'll drop your guns and—fight it out—man to man?"

For answer, the big man removed his guns, tossed them aside. "Fergus'll keep you covered, just in case anything goes wrong. I ain't worried." He didn't need to be, Jim thought, gauging the enormous height and breadth of the man, the massive shoulders and arms, the hammy hands. Jim's one-eight-pound frame was puny by comparison. Tanner could kill him with his bare hands, probably, if he so desired. But Jim welcomed the prospect of the hand-to-hand tussle.

Partly because it would give him a chance to play for time. Partly because he had a strength that was not apparent in his slight built frame, an agility in this sort of battle, and

speed which Tanner, with his great bulk, could hardly hope to match.

He loosened the loop that still hugged his arm against him, stepped out of it as it dropped to the ground.

Fels Tanner lumbered forward in a half crouch, his great arms crooked ready to swing a bludgeon-like blow to the head or to grapple with Jim, as opportunity offered.

JIM stood on wide legs, waiting for the bigger man to make the first move. Tanner lashed out with a right hand. Jim ducked under the blow, tried to club the big man in the stomach. Tanner fell away with the blow, absorbing its power and chuckling.

"Powderpuff punch, that was," he mocked.

Jim swung at him again. The big man grabbed his arm in a viselike grip, twisted it. Meanwhile, he was turning his back, pulling Jim bodily over his down-thrust torso. Jim hit the sandy underfooting on the small of his back. He was shaken up, but not finished.

Tanner was standing above him with arms akimbo, disdaining to pounce on him.

"Get up," he panted. "Get up an' fight."

Jim had an ear to the ground. He stilled his own fast breaths, and listened intently. He could hear a feeble clop-clop of hooves in the distance. They moved fast, then slowly, then quickly again, and finally he heard them slow to a walk. He could hear sounds lying thus, with one ear on the ground, that were inaudible to the hulking giant above him and to the man Fergus. Jim smiled slowly, and got to his feet.

Tanner tried to send a fist crashing into Jim's face. His intention was to mark Jim up; he had said that. He wanted to make Jim look like a fool, in the eyes of men back at Dawes. Jim didn't appreciate the prospect; he ducked again, grasped Tanner's outflung arm with both hands, pried inside the man's thrusting knees, and suddenly twisted the single arm he was holding.

Tanner bellowed with pain and flung a knee upward. Jim caught it on his thigh. It felt as if his leg were being wrenched off at the hip. But he drove forward, pushing the bigger man off balance. He got a leg in back of Tanner, lunged forward. The big man toppled, went careening back and down.

Jim followed him all the way down. There was a fair-sized rock in the ground below. Jim steered Tanner's head toward it, brought the big man down with a hard thump against the stone's hard surface. There was an expression of glazed bewilderment in the big man's eyes. He lurched, trying to rise. But the strength was not in him.

Jim lifted him by the shoulders, slammed him back on the stone again. It was unfair tactics, perhaps, but this could be a life-and-death battle, and all was fair here, the way Jim saw it. He watched total blankness spread over the outlaw's face, and then he stood up and yelled with cupped hands, down the trail toward Dawes:—

"Keep this other one covered, Muley!"

FERGUS, who had stood by with drawn gun, watching his leader's defeat with wide-eyed astonishment, was glowering now. He had the gun pointed straight at Jim's chest, and his finger was slowly tensing on the trigger.

From the bend in the trail toward Dawes came the single impact of a high-powered rifle. Fergus suddenly stiffened, then relaxed completely and went plummeting forward. He was dead before he hit the ground. There was a tiny hole in the side of his head, where the bullet had entered.

When Muley came up, Jim said, panting, "Nice. It was just in time, though. He was ready to plug me. I knew you were there. I had my ear to the ground, and I could hear every step your horse was taking. I could even hear you stop your mount and get off."

As he talked, he was going through Tanner's pockets. He found a scrap of paper with a note scribbled on it.

Fels: No guard at the bank,

(Continued On Page 93)

TO KILL A MAN

By Dev Klapp

Hoot Chaney *planned to kill the lawman who'd sent him to an unearned prison term. Then he found a way to make Bud McIntyre die slowly!*

FOR sixty miles Hoot Chaney had practiced that draw. No belt and gun hung at his hip, but over and over his lean fingers streaked down and up, gradually limbering up the stiffness that was in them. Hoot knew that he was ready to meet Sheriff Bud McIntyre now—ready to meet him on even terms.

Gray, bent and wizened, the little man still had two talents. Ten years behind cold, grim walls had not taken them from him. His way with horses was a gift; his speed with a gun was the result of long practice. Flexing his supple fingers, and smiling grimly, Hoot Chaney knew that he could pull a gun from leather with almost the speed that had built his sinister reputation in the old days.

Topping a rise, the aging man saw below him the familiar group of rough wooden and stone buildings that he had known as Limestone a decade ago. Grimly his thin lips twisted down, recording the thought that ran through his mind. "Ten years of my life gone to hell!" he muttered. "But Bud'll pay—he'll pay for every damned one of 'em!"

Throwing the reins of his horse across a tie rail by Jenning's Hardware Store, he contemplated the dejected animal before him. "You ain't worth that ten-spot Warden Lane give me to start life over on again," he said and smiled. He gave the horse's rough, dusty hide a slap and stepped up on the sidewalk.

Pleasant thoughts of revenge whirled throughout Hoot Chaney's graying head. *First I'll line up a job. Gotta get money to buy me a Colt, get grub for me and the crowbait.* Head down, absorbed in his thoughts, Hoot Chaney failed to notice the

big. beefy man that strode down the board walk toward him.

Clyde Zimmer, too, was thinking, but not about the dusty saddle-bum that approached him. Rage boiled behind his beefy face, bubbled out from his fat-padded icy-blue eyes. He had just dropped a cool thousand across the green-felted table at the Longhorn Bar. Never a good loser, the gambler and horse fancier was dangerous now.

A collision was inevitable. The force behind Zimmer's big body knocked Hoot to the walk. In falling he grabbed for support, clutched the rancher's red silk shirt. He tore a strip from the cloth as he went down.

THE little man struggled to his feet, an apology on his lips. He saw red anger blaze on the big man's face. At the same moment he recognized the only other man in Limeston whom he disliked. Stubbornly he set his lean jaw and looked the horse fancier up and down insolently.

"Dam yore lousy hide!" Clyde Zimmer roared. "Are you blind?" His big fist shot out, caught the little man square in the face. Blood gushed from Hoot Chaney's nose. He went down. Quickly he bounced up, tears of pain watering his brown eyes. Boring in, the little man sank a bony fist, wrist-deep, into the fat belly. Big knuckles smashed into his chest, lifted him off his feet and sat him back on the walk with a spine-jarring crash.

"I'll learn you better manners, you damn saddle-bum!" the big rancher sputtered. He advanced toward the little man, drew back a polished boot. "I'll kick yore rotten ribs in!"

"Lay off, Zimmer!" a stern voice ordered.

The horse fancier whirled, recognized the white-haired man standing there. "This ain't none of yore business, McIntyre! You ain't no longer sheriff!"

"Go pick on somebody yore size, Zimmer," Bud McIntyre said. "before this thing ends up with somebody gettin' shot!"

Sardonic light gleamed from the fat-padded eyes. "That ain't a very nice way to treat a man you're in debt to, is it, McIntyre?" Zimmer spun on his heel, then, as if struck by an afterthought, turned and added, "Don't forget. Them I. O. U.s come due next month! I gotta pay for the palomino racer I bought today!"

Sending a vindictive glance after the horse fancier's retreating figure, Hoot Chaney thought, *I got two things to even up with you now, hombre.*

Ex-sheriff Bud McIntyre helped the little man to his feet. "Kind o' down on yore luck, ain't you, partner?" he questioned. "If you're any good with horses I might give you a job. 'Tain't much I can pay, but we eat regular."

..So this is Bud McIntyre, Hoot thought. Not like the McIntyre he left ten years ago. He had forgotten the element of time, had visualized his enemy as he had been when the sheriff collared Hoot Chaney, and sent him off to prison for a crime he had not committed. *Reckon I've changed a right smart myself,* he thought. *The old coot don't know me.*

The little man thrust out a scrawny hand then. "Reckon you done hired yoreself a man, mister!" he said.

"Get yore hoss, er—er—" the sheriff paused.

"Er—Slocum. Jeff Slocum." Hoot Chaney gave the ficticious name with a grim smile.

"Meet me at the Longhorn Bar, Slocum," McIntyre ordered gruffly. "You look like a shot of red-eye might put some iron in yore legs!"

* * *

HOOT CHANEY walked from the corral and threw himself down on the veranda step of the Tin Star Ranch house. He had kept out of sight. The beard had helped some. If Zimmer and McIntyre hadn't recognized him, maybe the others wouldn't. But there was no use taking chances before he got the big job finished. After that it didn't matter—

The little man's brain seethed with hate toward the old ex-sheriff seated

there in a wicker chair, rocking to and fro. The way the old man twirled his longhorn mustaches got on his nerves. He controlled the muscles of his face with an effort.

"Nice spread you got here," the little man said. His eyes traveled over the rolling pasture land to the purple hills beyond. *Better be nice to the old coot 'till the right time,* he thought.

"I spent every cent on it that I saved from forty years of sheriffin'," the old man said. "Always wanted a little piece of land to settle on when I got old," he added with a sigh. "Reckon I won't get to keep it though at that."

"You mean because of them I. O. U.s Clyde Zimmer holds?" Hard lines set on the little man's face. He was remembering the flaying fists of the bullying rancher.

"Yeah," the ex-sheriff groaned. "Drank too much of Lopez' tequila one night. Got in a card game with Zimmer. Never could play poker. First thing I know he held a fistful of my paper with the cattle and ranch backin' it up. Damnedest thing that ever happened to me! After forty years of seein' suckers beat out of their money and then I do the same blasted thing! It ain't possible, seems like!"

The old man stopped rocking, tugged viciously at the white mustache. "He won't get that big black of mine, though. It waren't in the deal." A mirthless cackle dribbled from the ex-sheriff's lips, startled a roosting field-sparrow in the honeysuckle vines about the porch. "He'd rather have that black stallion than my ranch!"

Little Hoot Chaney sat on the steps, arms hugging spindly legs. His eyes were far away in the hills. He was thinking. A purple spire rose above the surrounding slopes. It was there that Hoot made his stand ten years before. It was there that a younger McIntyre walked up to him, under the threat of a leveled six-gun, took his weapon away. Old Sol Watson had been killed. Hoot and Sol had locked horns repeatedly, so Hoot was suspected. Especially when Clyde Zimmer had, with the greatest reluctance, admitted seeing him near the scene.

They gimme twenty years, Hoot Chaney thought grimly. He stole a look at the old man in the rocker. *Warn't because of him they knocked off ten years.* Ten years for a crime he had never committed. That was why he was going to kill Bud McIntyre.

HATE seethed in Hoot Chaney's narrow chest. What if the old man had treated him decently since he got back. It was all to the old coot's own advantage. One look at that rock-hard, seamed face would tell a man not to expect any favors from Bud McIntyre.

A soundless chuckle came from the little man's lips. He cast another sidelong glance at the ex-sheriff on the porch. His fingers curled around the butt of the old .44 Bud had loaned him. How easy it would be to gun the old man down where he sat. He could cook up a story, claim self-defense. No. His record would be against him. A better plan seeped slowly into his prison-warped mind —a fool-proof plan. He turned to the old lawman.

"Clyde Zimmer puts a right smart stock in that palomino of his, don't he?"

"Yep," Bud McIntyre bristled. "That horse can't hold a candle to my big black, though! Zimmer thinks different, of course."

"You said Zimmer's a last-chip gambler, didn't you?" Hoot asked. A sly look crept into his eyes. The prison pallor rose again to his face as emotion washed away the sunburn of recent weeks.

"That hombre would bet anything against anything!" the ex-sheriff snorted. "Trouble is he can't lose good."

"Think he'd race his palomino against yore black stallion?"

The old man froze. It was a long time before he spoke. "Might, why?"

"Think he'd put up them I. O. U.s against yore horse. Winners keepers?"

The old lawman sighed. "My black stallion can beat Zimmer's horse, but I'm too old to ride a race."

"I can," the little man announced flatly. Everything was working out fine. He had anticipated the old man's answer. His eyes ran around like little brown rats under half-closed lids. A crafty smile cracked his thin lips.

"I know you can," the sheriff answered gruffly. "I watched you round them cows up today."

"Fix it up with the fat sidewinder tomorrow then," Hoot said. Rising and stretching his skinny arms the little man yawned. "Better get some shut-eye, I reckon, if I'm gonna be worth a damn tomorrow. Gotta feed the black first though."

"Get on to bed, Slocum," the sheriff told him "I'll feed the critter."

* * *

THE sun was high. Already little heat devils were beginning to dance across the level land. Hoot Chaney sat the magnificent black. The horse's coat gleamed in the sun, curried carefully from head to foot., Proudly Clyde Zimmer sat astride the beautiful palomino. The golden animal held his head smartly erect. His shapely hooves pawed the ground impatiently. His whitish-gold tail switched at a bothersome fly. Zimmer spoke softly from the side of his thick mouth.

"Remember, punk, a hundred if you throw the race!"

Hoot Chaney noded his graying head inperceptibly.

Bud McIntyre's voice roared across the clearing. "First man to the sycamore wins the race! Pete Carrol is there waiting now!"

Old Judge Holton raised the big gun high, hesitated a moment, pulled the trigger. At the sharp report both horses leaped forward. Hooves thundered. The spirited animals stretched out for the long run, riders low over their necks.

Zimmer's palomino took the lead, two lengths ahead, kept it for a mile. Inch by inch the black crept up. Hoot Chaney's mind was a chaos of conflicting emotions now. This was the time to get even. The moment that he had waited ten years for had come. He had returned to Limestone to kill a man. He had it in his power now to do more than merely kill his enemy.

Lose this race and Bud McIntyre would be ruined. Ranch, cattle, and this big black stallion, living symbol of the old man's pride, would go. Too old to start again, the old ex-sheriff would quickly go to pieces, be dead within a year. He'd die a slow death. It would be more painful than a bullet—and Hoot Chaney wouldn't even have to face another murder charge. It was working out better than he had hoped.

Hoot Chaney pulled back on the reins. The big animal fought the bit. Hoot could feel the power of rippling muscles beneath his own spindly legs, could smell the rank odor of sweat from the horse's hide. Series of little chill bumps broke out on his neck. A streak of excitement, of pride in a horse, raced up his spine. Hoot Chaney hadn't experienced a feeling like that in ten years.

Neck stretched forward, the black stallion gradually closed the gap, pulled up closer to the lighter, nimbler palomino. Clyde Zimmer was a load for any horse. He was vain, else he would have given his place to a slimmer man. Instead, the fat man had fixed the difference with a hundred dollars—

The sheriff had been good to Hoot. He couldn't put that thought from his mind. He had taken him in, a penniless bum, fed, clothed and armed him. This man he was racing had hit and abused him. The ex-convict could still feel the hurt of those big knuckles. And then that day in the courtroom. He had that account to square yet. The little man was getting all mixed up—and he'd had it planned out so perfectly.

To hell with all this soft stuff, the ex-convict thought. He gripped the reins tighter, pulled back harder.

THE wavy, coal-black mane of the stallion brushed the little man's cheek, like the nibble of a velvet nose. The black snorted, fought the bit. His powerful body strained, fought bravely.

Something snapped then in Hoot Chaney's brain. "To hell with every-

thing, boy! Git yore mangy hide on down the line! I'll get old McIntyre with a bullet 'stead o' this way! It wouldn't be fair to you, you big hunk o' worthless crowbait!"

Hoot Chaney saw the beefy lips of Clyde Zimmer mouth an oath as he crept up on him, saw the glare in his hate-filled eyes. The big man raised his quirt then. "You damned saddle-tramp!" he exploded. He brought the quirt down heavily. It bit into Hoot Chaney's face.

The ex-convict reeled in his saddle. Blood streamed down and across his chin, lost itself in the dusty neckerchief. It hurt like hell. Insane rage flushed his sallow cheeks red. If he shot the man now the race would be off. He let go the handle of his six-gun.

The big sycamore was in sight. A man stood out from it, held his hand aloft. Now was the time for the big black stallion to show his stuff. Hoot Chaney strained every nerve, leaned forward. Like an electric current an impulse of excitement ran through his legs. He leaned nearer the outstretched head, whispered words into the laid-back velvety ears.

Hoot Chaney had a way with horses. The black thundered ahead. They roared across the finish line, kicking dust into Pete Carrol's face.

The two men pulled their mounts up a full quarter-mile beyond the sycamore. Both slid from the saddle.

"You damned double-crossin' tramp!" Clyde Zimmer roared, his face congested with the blood of sudden rage. "Thought I didn't know you, eh? You've got in my way for the last time, Chaney. I'll do somethin' worse than send you to jail this time!"

The little man's jaw dropped. He stared at the big rancher with widening eyes. "So it was *you* had me put away!"

"Yeah! And you'd have stayed there for all them twenty years if it hadn't been for Bud McIntyre, the old fool! He pulled some strings and got you out!"

HOOT CHANEY knew that the man before him didn't care how much he told now. He knew from the twitching of the fat fingers that Zimmer meant to kill him. The fat man could cook up a story, claim self-defense. Against an ex-convict it wouldn't be hard.

"What you have against me, Zimmer?" Hoot asked, his curiosity rising. There was a deadly quality in his flat voice. His lean fingers, held well out from the black gun butt at his side, were writhing, preparing for what was to come.

"You got too nosey about that

Cotton Drennan didn't like the setup at Jackson Malloy's spread, but when he found that Malloy's longriders were murdering innocent nesters, he knew the time had come to buck the outfit.

BUCKAROO'S CODE

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By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

appears complete in the October

WESTERN ACTION

Oakland horse deal. The marshal's hot breath was blowin' down my neck. You knew I needled that nag. I had to get you out of the way before you made up yore mind to protest the race." The man's moist, fat lips parted in a smile of self-appreciation at his own cleverness. "That murder, me plantin' the thought in a few folks' minds that you done it, took yore own mind off the race like I figgered it would. Too, I had a score to settle with old Sol Watson. Killed two birds with one whack! I give you a record. Now nobody would take yore word agin' mine!"

Hoot asked, "Why're you tellin' me all this?"

"I'm gonna kill you, cowboy—you've got in a bad habit. It don't pay to cross Clyde Zimmer!" There was a crafty look in the big man's eyes. "Ten years in the calaboose, I figger, has slowed yore draw considerable!"

A note of triumph came to the thick voice. Hoot Chaney was watching the man's fat-embedded yes, saw the killer-light leap into them a fraction of a second before the fat fists dived for the leather at his side.

As the big hand clawed for the gun, Hoot Chaney's slim supple fingers reached, pulled and fired before the fat man's gun had fully cleared leather. The rancher made a motion with his mouth as if to spit out the bullet that had sunk deep into his chest. His eyes popped from their fat sockets in surprise. Clyde Zimmer's knees buckled then. He slid to the ground like a half-filled sack of meal.

Elation swelled Hoot Chaney's narrow chest, filled it with gladness. Then the little man's eyes clouded as pang of guilt coursed through him. But he hadn't let Bud McIntyre down. Here before him lay the man he had come to Limestone to kill—whether he had known it or not.

* * *

"YOU ran a mighty good race, Hoot!" Ex-sheriff McIntyre called as he approached the little man. There was a twinkle in the mealy gray eyes.

"You knew me, too, of course. Reckon I been pretty dumb," Hoot Chaney said. "'Bout a whole lot of things." He dropped his head.

Bud McIntyre smiled. He looked at the sprawled body of Clyde Zimmer. "I never was as foxy as folks gimme credit," he said slowly. "I wasn't proud of sendin' you up. Somethin' didn't look right about the whole thing. I suspected Zimmer, tried my damndest to work him into it. I couldn't. They had a pretty strong line of circumstantial evidence agin' you—so the jury sent you up. But I felt like I was the cause of it—like a man feels when he don't pull the trigger at a shootin' but has give the order to fire."

"Knowin' who I was, figgerin' I come back to get even—you took a mighty big chance lettin' me ride that black!" Hoot Chaney's face was solemn.

"Didn't take no chance," the old ex-lawman smiled. "Clyde Zimmer's always been a hot-head. But he was a hand to play safe. I figgered he'd bribe you to lose the race. I knowed blame well if you beat him, Clyde's temper would go wild and he'd probably bust out with the truth. I knowed more about yore draw than he did—been watchin' you practice it ever since you come to work for me." The old man struck a match to his quirley. "Knowin' you, and how you feel about horses, I didn't believe you'd lose the race—but I couldn't take a chance. There was too much at stake for both of us."

Walking over to the panting black, the old man patted the animal's nose fondly. He grasped the end of a broken curb chain between sun-cracked fingers then. "Filed it nearly in two," the ex-lawman said slowly. "One good heavy pull back on the reins and she popped!"

He looked at the little man. "This black can't see no other nag get ahead of him, and he's got a mighty hard mouth." Bud McIntyre grinned slowly. There was a twinkle in his mealy gray eyes. "It's his only fault—"

(THE END)

OWLHOOT DINERO

By Ralph Berard

Sheriff Holcolm didn't propose to let anything spoil his daughter's wedding, particularly Holcolm's own back trail!

SHERIFF Jerry Holcolm drew in his sweating horse, steadied himself in the saddle. Gunfire bla .d ahead in the semi-darkness. It made a lurid flash, brighter, more ominous, than the first faint streaks of yellow dawn in the east.

The shrill whine of the bullet sliced the air within inches of the lawman's head. Deputy Jim Cadway overtook and passed the sheriff, returning the fire of the fleeing bandit.

Sheriff Holcolm steadied himself, rose evenly in the stirrups; the big sixgun leveled in his hand. A new flash of red came from the bandit. Holcolm ignored the whining lead as his own finger pressed trigger. The dim silhouette of the man on the horse ahead changed form, crumpled. Deputy Cadway's excited voice drifted back, "You got him, Sheriff; knocked him off his horse."

Holcolm moved forward again. Cadway had drawn in his mount. The two lawmen advanced cautiously, riding side by side, guns ready. The bandit was trying to get onto his feet.

The dawn light grew stronger. The bandit had a hard time to stand. There seemed no longer to be any fight in him. Holcolm dismounted while his deputy kept the wounded gunman covered. It took only a minute to handcuff the fellow. They recovered his horse and got him into the saddle.

* * *

Two hours later, after a bit of breakfast, Holcolm went into the little Silver River jail in the rear of his office. He felt a bit weary and was tremendously provoked at that because this was the day his daughter, Julia, was to marry Carl Draisler. The sheriff's heart was set on the wedding coming off perfectly. . . . most everything Holcolm treasured was tied up in Julia.

The young bandit's wound seemed more painful than serious. He might not have been bad looking if he'd cleaned up a bit. He scowled as the lawman unlocked his cell but Holcolm didn't think it was a very bad scowl.

The sheriff sat down on a wooden stool and motioned his prisoner to sit on the iron cot. "You don't look old enough or tough enough to be robbing banks," he said frankly. "You must have had help." He leaned forward, ran his hands more carefully over the young bandit's body than he had when he'd searched him for an extra weapon. "You got any that bank money on you?"

The kid was afraid. He had blue eyes and a frank open-appearing face. "I didn't have any help," he growled unconvincingly. "I ain't got any of the money."

Holcolm straightened back on his stool and smiled. "What's your name, son? It'd be better to tell me everything. I got a daughter gettin' married t'day; I ain't got much time but I hate to see a young 'un like you in such serious trouble. Did you know Pat Osten died? He was the banker you shot last night."

A startled expression leaped into the lad's eyes. "I never shot that banker. I was standing guard at the door and. . . ." He stopped himself, anger and fear mingling in his eyes, as if he realized his tongue had slipped before he could think.

Holcolm said, "You had a helper all

right. Better come clean. Tell me all about it."

"Am I facing a murder charge?" Fear was growing in the boy's face.

"You maybe are facing a lynching," Holcolm said. He fell silent, suddenly thinking what a lynching would mean for Julia. You couldn't have a peaceful wedding in a lynch-enraged town like Silver River might quickly become. "Pat Osten was mighty well liked," he said thoughtfully, half to himself.

"My right name's Peter Gloring." The young bandit wet his lips. "My folks needed money awful bad."

"Where is the money?" Holcolm urged.

Young Gloring wet his lips again, hesitated.

"YOU AIN'T more'n seventeen or eighteen, lad. If I could tell folks you didn't go in for no killing, that you surrendered as soon as you found there'd been a murder and had turned back the money. . . . "

"I. . . . I'll tell you, sheriff." Gloring's hands went to his shirt. He began unbuttoning the front. "We divided the money and rode in separate directions. I had things planned out in advance and. . . " He pulled open his undershirt and disclosed a bandage across his chest like a mustard plaster. As he ripped it aside with his good hand, a bunch of new bills fluttered out. The kid had grown excited. His sudden exertion strained the bandage Holcolm's deputy had made around his wounded shoulder. A little blood started flowing again. Gloring looked at it, grimaced with pain. Then he turned appealing eyes on the sheriff. "I don't want to be hanged."

Holcolm was busy gathering up the bills. "Tell me about your helper," he demanded sternly, "an' I'll see what can be done."

Holcolm counted five hundred dollars in crisp new bills while Gloring described a heavy-set dark man of fifty he had met only the morning before and who had made him the proposition of robbing the bank. "My folks needed the money," he repeated apologetically, "and then this fellow cheated me. He got four or five thousand last night. It was him shot the teller. I only stood guard at the door."

"Uh-huh." Holcolm rubbed his chin thoughtfully, stuffed the recovered bank money into an inside pocket. He asked a few more questions, then went out and locked the cell door. When he got to his office, he told Cadway, "Go back and chew the rag with the kid. He's scared, anxious to talk. Let me know what he says."

Cadway understood. He'd fought beside Holcolm in some tight places. The sheriff could depend on him.

* * *

Holcolm was busy for an hour. He counted the money again and put it away. He checked over his wardrobe to make sure there'd be no flaw in his personal appearance at the wedding. He'd have to change clothes in the office and. . . he was stroking his best blue polka-dotted tie admiringly when the door burst open.

Julia came in with a little hop-skip step. She reached both arms up around his neck, lifted both heels clear off the floor, kissed him and whispered, "This is the happiest day of my life, dad."

"Sure, and it should be," Holcolm said. He stroked her hair with his big rough hand, blinked moisture from his eyes. There was more behind this getting married than Julia knew. There was more behind it in more ways than one. Julia was just his little girl, his baby. She would never know the story he'd told her about her mother dying in the east and him bringing her west when she was just a baby wasn't true. She was his daughter, wasn't she? It had been a big job raising her, no job for a man to tackle alone, specially not a man who had to rod the law, who might not be coming home some night.

"Ah-hh." Holcolm sighed. That was all over now. This was Julie's wedding day. She was marrying one of the finest boys in the valley. "Sure, you're the happiest girl in the world. You're my little Julie." He kissed her again, swore at himself silently for

being a sentimental old fool. "Now run along. I'll be on time right enough; you needn't worry about it."

Julia made the same little hop and skip getting to the door. She disappeared down the wooden sidewalk and, almost at the same moment, a horseman rode up, dismounted and tied his horse in front of the office.

HOLCOLM STOOD watching through the window, his forehead furrowed. There was something vaguely familiar about the way the stranger moved, about the way he tied his horse. When he turned and faced the sheriff's door, Holcolm had a hard time controlling an involuntary start. He turned abruptly from the window, his hand fell unbidden to the holster at his side. It was good to feel the hard, re-assuring butt of his sixgun as he sat down behind his old desk to face the big, middle-aged man who stalked into his office.

The stranger only glanced at Holcolm. He looked carefully about the room, his eyes resting a long moment on the rear door leading to the jail, as if to make certain the two of them would not be interrupted. A threatening grin spread slowly on his dark face. He walked across the little office, picked up the extra chair Cadway usually sat in, planted himself in a cross-legged somewhat insolent position a few feet in front of the lawman's desk. "It's been a long time, hasn't it, Swanson?"

Holcolm did not miss the cold insinuation in the man's tone. "It's been a long time, Caldeen," he agreed. "Was it you who talked the boy I got inside into traveling the Primrose trail last night?"

Caldeen laughed softly, gratingly. "You wouldn't accuse me of a low trick like that, would you, sheriff? The fact is, I don't go in much for anything as crude as robbery any more. There's easier and safer ways of earning one's daily bread."

"You mean the robbery and murder last night was out of your usual course?" Holcolm insisted levelly.

"I ain't got a lot o' time," Caldeen snapped gruffly. "Where I was, what I did last night, is something you can guess right enought maybe but can't prove. I dropped in this morning for a friendly call because I knew your Julie was gettin' married t'day. I thought maybe she wouldn't like to hear her dear father wasn't her father at all and that there was a murder charge hanging over his head in parts where he came from."

"She wouldn't believe that," Holcolm said. He was forcing himself to calm reason. This was the moment he had always feared. The past was catching up with him and the truth about it was being twisted by a man who would turn it to any savage purpose his mad, criminal mind might conceive. "I killed a beast," he admitted in a quiet, controlled tone, "because if I hadn't, he'd have killed me. People who didn't know the beast made the mistake of calling him a man."

"Never mind the yarn," Caldeen interrupted. "We haven't much time. Julie's getting married in a few hours."

"WE'LL review the story," Holcolm said with firm finality. "I want it fresh in my memory so I'll know best what to do with whatever scheme you've hatched. This beast was a friend of yours. At least, you'd get drunk in the same saloons, land in the same jails on the same rustling charges and be suspected of the same killings. Maybe you were the least bestial, or maybe it was because you had no wife that you didn't go home and beat her in drunken fits of temper like Clary Gorled did. It's such a common and sordid yarn that maybe you're right in requesting we shouldn't repeat it but I reckon if I hadn't interfered the night I heard Julie screaming, he'd have killed her, too. She still carries the scars of that last beating he gave her when she was still too small to remember. I've had to lie to her about those scars and I've done a good job. It was only by the grace of the Lord, I found a sawbones who was willing to keep his mouth shut and was able to save her while we hid in his cabin.

"I've always been glad I killed the man who called himself Julie's fa-

ther because I knew I had to do it or he'd have killed Julie and killed me, too. It was his beatings that had kil' Julie's mother before that and I'm glad Julie believes other stories about a different kind of mother. I'm thankful the scars aren't on her face where they'd maybe kept her from marrying a good man."

"Yeah, yeah," Caldeen shrugged impatiently. "You was always a sentimental fool, Swanson. You got my sympathy and everything." He had drawn from his pocket a faded paper and was unfolding it. "You can't prove the killing was self-defense any more than you can prove I robbed the bank last night. That job didn't yield big returns. I had to give that kid five hundred. I had to hide the rest where it might be dangerous picking it up. I need a little ready cash for this old reward notice, sheriff, about two thousand dollars maybe."

Holcolm sat looking at a likeness of himself on the faded paper Caldeen held. *Wanted For Murder*, the placard read, $1000 *Reward*."

"Julie would enjoy reading this," Caldeen said suavely.

"You're a killer, a blackmailer," Halcolm said flatly. His hand started slipping toward his holster. His eyes did not leave the wicked bead-like eyes of the man before him. Caldeen had an air-tight case against him. The placard with his picture was something he couldn't explain away. But with his gun he could get it from Caldeen or they would find him dead here on the floor behind the desk.

Holcolm's eyes had become little mol[illegible] sparks of red. His right hand already firmly held the butt of his gun. Through clenched teeth, he said, "I didn't think you'd be such a fool, Swanson. You ain't got a chance of killing me. Even if you did, you'd never be able to explain why you did it. The killing you won't do Julie much good because I'll still have this poster. That'll justify my act."

Holcolm's hand came up slowly. There was no gun in it. "You got the advantage," he admitted slowly. "It's just a matter of money and I guess I can afford to pay."

HOLCOLM rose, stood still a moment, sighed like a very old and very tired man. He'd saved his pennies a long time. There was money in the safe, almost enough to meet Caldeen's demand. "I only got about eighteen hundred here. I got more in the bank."

"I'll take eighteen hundred," Caldeen snapped. "The bank's a bit short right now."

Holcolm kneeled by the little iron safe, counted out all that was there. He handed the money to Caldeen and Caldeen gave him the reward poster. Caldeen laughed his satisfaction, pocketed the money and walked from the office.

Holcolm glanced at the old clock behind his desk, then stepped to the rear door and called Cadway. He gave Cadway brief instructions, started unhitching his suspenders and reached for his best trousers in the little clothes closet.

* * *

Sheriff Jerry Holcolm was pretty nervous walking down the aisle of the little Silver River church. It was a new experience for him. He had a lot of things on his mind. He felt sure Cadway could carry out the assignment he had given. . . .but—

It was a big thrill and relief when Carl Draisler kissed Julie up there by the altar. Realizing how happy Julie was made the sheriff doubly anxious to get back to his office. Nothing must happen to spoil things now.

When Holcolm got there Caldeen was locked tight in the cell next to Peter Gloring just as the sheriff had planned. Cadway had deputized two helpers and taken no chances. They'd come up on Caldeen from three sides, covering him before he could grab for a gun. They'd searched him right there on Main Street and recovered five hundred dollars in nice new bills that had been stolen from the bank the night before.

Holcolm stood in front of Caldeen's cell and spoke loud enough for Gloring in the adjoining cell to hear. "Your mistake," he said, "was when you took the five hundred dol-

(Continued On Page 92)

"You'll get out of that chair and come with me!"

PRIMED FOR SLAUGHTER

By Charles D. Richardson, Jr.

***"Tombstone" Tolly's** heart was just about ready to quit — but his morale was as steady as ever!*

THERE are times when a doctor wishes he were just plain John Doe, citizen. Then he wouldn't be compelled to bog a man down with bad news such as Doc Finchcomb, medico of Thistle Bend, now was obligated to do.

Doc Finchcomb laid aside his stethoscope, studied the little man before him gravely. "Tombstone" Tolly was a forlorn-looking specimen, thin, bared chest shivering in the coolish room. Tolly had rounded shoulders, and his head was marble smooth. He hadn't a tooth he could grind mush on. But he was Doc Finchcomb's best friend and had helped the latter set up business. Doc felt like a heel to have to tell him the truth.

"Guess I need a drink," the beefy physician murmured. He went over to the medicine cabinet.

Tombstone Tolly followed him with rheumy eyes. The aged rancher had ridden in to get something for the pain in his chest. Tombstone was anxious to return to his Circle LB spread because of the recent trouble he'd had with rustlers.

"Dammit, Doc," he said, rubbing his prominent ribs, "Gimme some pills and tell me what to do. I ain't got time to burn."

Doc Finchcomb lowered his glass. He wiped his lips with the back of

his hand. Then he looked at Tombstone Tolly.

"Tombstone," he said quietly, "You won't be needing no pills."

Tombstone's face lit up. "You mean I kin go home now?"

"I mean," Doc said, "there's nothing I can do for you. Tombstone, you've got a very bad heart."

Tolly's expression remained set. His gray old eyes registered neither surprise nor alarm. Quietly, he slipped on his shirt. "I been expectin' it. Let's have the details."

Finchcomb went on to explain how old age, continued over-exertion in the struggle with rustler raids, finally had weakened the organ to the place where it could not perform its function. Anytime, Tombstone might drop over. Two minutes from now or maybe not for several months.

"You might last a year, if you take it easy," Doc concluded. "Tombstone, I wish there was something I could do."

Tombstone Tolly looked up. He tightened his gunbelt, smiled faintly.

"Skip it," he said. "You got worries of your own. Well, I reckon I'll be goin'. Got a little deal on with a gent named Sackett. Owe that jasper somethin'. Since it ain't certain how long I'll last, I want to set my affairs straight. So long, Doc. Next time we meet may be in heaven; if I'm lucky enough."

Doc Finchcomb stared after the retreating figure. The rancher was making for Ham Roan's Hardware store across the street. Ham and old Tombstone had known each other since childhood, and Ham never sent Tolly a bill for anything. Tombstone Tolly always paid his debts somehow.

DOC FINCHCOMB gave a start. Debts? Tombstone Tolly owed something to the man who was behind all his present trouble. That man was Bull's-eye Sackett, gunny leader of the rustler band. And Tombstone had mentioned settling things with him. Only one answer to that; Tombstone Tolly meant to meet Sackett in a gunsmoke showdown.

Tolly had as much chance in a gunduel with Bull's-eye Sackett as a celluloid cat in hell. Bull's-eye lived up to his peculiar nickname. He took pride in the fact that he unfailingly drilled his victims right through the heart. A difficult target, only for experts.

"By Judas!"

Doc Finchcomb sprang to his feet. He pulled down an old gunbelt with holstered .45 from the wall. He buckled it on hastily. "By Judas," he said, as if the rows of bottles, papers and instruments on his desk could hear him, "Tombstone Tolly may not have long to live, but I ain't aiming to see that time cut short by a slimy snake."

As he scuttled through the dust, Doc realized what he was up against. Bull's-eye Sackett had the whole town, including the sheriff, buffalowed. Sackett ran the Thistle Bend Saloon, as well as the Diamond Box spread up Orinoco way. Hard fisted, a wizard at gunplay, Bull's-eye forced the smaller ranchmen and homesteaders to sell out. If they refused, Sackett and his gang rustled their herds.

Bull's-eye had singled out Tombstone as a special victim because of the latter's grit and spunk. Tombstone openly defied Sackett, ordered him off his ranch the day the latter had made him the ridiculous offer of five hundred dollars for the Circle LB. The next night the Sackett gang rustled a third of Tolly's herd.

Tombstone's spread had the best grazing land in the district and Bull's-eye Sackett meant to have it.

Sheriff Ben Gideon was dozing in his swivel chair when Doc burst in. "Ben," the medico said, "I've got a damned important job for you." He proceeded to tell the lawman about Tombstone.

"You know Tombstone," Doc finished. "He'll go through hell and brimstone for what he's set his mind on. Even if it means losing his life. And Ben, sure as you're sitting there, that's just what it will mean."

The sheriff yawned. He avoided the other's eyes. "Don't see how to stop it. You say Tombstone's liable to die any time from a bum pump. Reckon we might as well lay low and—"

Doc Finchcomb's six-shooter whipped in Gideon's face.

"You and me are going in to Sackett's place and stop that killing," Doc said grimly. "Tombstone's bound to die, but it won't be by Sackett's dirty paws. Get out of that chair, Gideon."

Grumbling about contempt of law and "poking your nose in other gent's business," the sheriff nevertheless scraped to his feet. Doc had a hard look in his eyes that brooked no argument. The two men went out into the street.

As they entered the Thistle Bend Saloon, Gideon managed to get ahead of Doc, mingling with the crowd of cowpokes and miners. Doc cursed at the sight of the lawman talking excitedly with the giant owner. Doc could read the gist of the conversation from the expressions on the two men's faces.

"He's putting Bull's-eye on guard," Finchcomb grated. "Not ordering him to lay off. The damn yellow skunk! Now I've got to head off Tombstone before it's too late."

IT SEEMED hours before the pathetic figure of Tombstone Tolly dragged itself through the batwing doors and stood in the light of the smoking lamps. Tombstone seemed to have difficulty in getting a full breath. He was clutching at his flannel shirt front.

Doc rushed over to him.

"Tombstone! Sackett and his skunks are laying for you! That louse of a sheriff talked, after I tried to get his help. Don't try a gunplay now, Tombstone, even if you ain't got long to live. Don't give Bull's-eye the satisfaction—"

Tombstone shook him off. When he spoke, his voice was fringed with ice.

"Stay out of this, Doc. It's gonna be mighty unhealthy around here in the next few minutes and I don't want you hurt. You clear out pronto, Doc, understand?"

Doc Finchcomb watched Tombstone Tolly go to his death. There wasn't a chance in the world of Tombstone's beating Bull's-eye to the draw. The rancher was well up in years, his fingers had lost their agility. Sackett would drop him like lightning.

The doctor drew his own weapon. "First move Bull's-eye makes for his hip," he promised himself, "will be his last."

Finchcomb felt a sickening blow on his head and he sank to his knees, stunned. Joe Branch, Sackett's lanky henchman, moved in front of him and he held a six-gun by the muzzle. Branch bent and removed Doc's gun.

"The boss likes a clear field in his gun duels," Joe Branch said, grinning.

Doc stared numbly across the room. Tombstone Tolly was at the bar now, standing in spraddle-legged defiance before the saloon owner.

"Bull's-eye Sackett," he was saying clearly, "You've done your best to ruin me. You've rustled my herd, gun-whipped me and my waddies when we put up a kick. You figured

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you'd broke me for keeps and you're about right. I'm livin' on borrowed time. But before I go out, I'm settling with you, you polecat, for all the hell you've caused me."

Bull's-eye Sackett's expressionless green eyes narrowed. He grinned and the rest in the room read the death sign in that grin. Everyone in the saloon, with the exception of Bull's-eye and his men, Finchcomb and the aged Tolly, made a general rush for the batwing doors, Sheriff Gideon reaching them first.

Bull's-eye Sackett moved a little to the right.

"So," the saloonman drawled, "the coyote acquires a new set of guts. Better get back to home and slippers, grandpa. You've bit off more than you can chaw, this time."

Tombstone's seamy hand trembled, dipped for his holster.

"Cut the clownin', Sackett," he hissed, "And go for your gun!"

IT WAS like the flight of an arrow, the way Bull's-eye Sackett's hand sped hipward. Sackett's .45 leaped to his waist, coughing. Doc Finchcomb, staring horror-fixed beside the gunman Branch, saw Tolly's right arm jerk, a black hole suddenly appear in the shirt sleeve. Then the saloonman's weapon was kicking again, and the bullet entered Tolly's left arm.

Bull's-eye Sackett chuckled.

"Ordinarily," he said amusedly, "I drop 'em with the first shot. Feel like takin' it easy tonight. Spring fever, I reckon. Ho-hum."

Tombstone Tolly retained his hold on his gun with effort. He coughed up a red froth. He strove futilely to raise the gun. "Get you yet," he whispered.

Sackett took deliberate aim. "Keep your eyes on that shirt pocket of Tolly's, boys. Right over his heart. Look sharp, and you'll see a little black hole appear plumb center—"

Doc Finchcomb heard the gun bark, he saw the distinct *flack* of the pocket of Tombstone's flannel shirt, then the fat doctor knew no more. The room seemed to bulge out every which way. A deafening explosion drew tables, chairs, and men into the air, and flung them against the walls.

Joe Branch was bowled over like a tenpin. He fell across Finchcomb's unconscious form. A few Sackett men ran yelling from the now blazing building. Others lay still where they had fallen.

Doc Finchcomb finally came around, slid out from beneath the heavy Joe Branch. He stared at the wreckage about him.

The place was a mess of men, splintered bottles and furniture. Bodies draped over the rafters, sprawled on the bartop. In the far corner, the huge shape of Bull's-eye Sackett slumped, his big, apelike head lolling on a broken neck. He looked oddly like a puppet doll, carelessly cast aside.

Tombstone Tolly lay a bit apart from the rest. The little man's body was torn almost beyond recognition, but Doc Finchcomb forced himself to look. Tombstone wore a smile, like that of one who has accomplished much, and now was willing to call it a day. The pain creases, so often present in his forehead, now were ironed out.

"Game old cuss," murmured Doc. "But what caused the explosion?"

Ham Roan, the heavyset hardware store owner, barged in.

"Good Lord!" he said glaring at the wreck. "I told Tombstone to be careful of them T. N. T. capsules. He said he wanted 'em for blowin' stumps on his spread. Dang fool slipped a dozen of the capsules in his shirt pocket and—"

Doc Finchcomb looked again at Tombstone's calm face and nodded. He knew now that Tolly had deliberately loaded himself with the explosive to trap Sackett who would drill him before he could scratch leather. Tombstone, who could have hurled the deadly capsules at Bull's-eye and saved himself, chose the hard way. Tombstone craved the grim irony involved with the act of inviting Sackett's gunplay, the play that would be the finish of them both.

"Yeah," Doc repeated softly, "A game pigeon."

(THE END)

DEATH LOADS THE STICK

By CLIFF CAMPBELL

Guns can't break the power of the printed word!

THAT midnight a slight breeze came down from the snow-tipped peaks of the Bearpaws, bringing its cool touch to the heavy jowels of Jack Hartman as he went through the alley back of old Henry Rakestraw's printing establishment. But if the heavy-set saloonman felt the breeze his heated features did not show it; he had killed a few men before but it had not affected him like this.

He ran a pudgy finger around the inside of his silk collar, the heavy diamond that circled the finger reflecting tiny facets of light from the waning moon. Then the assuring weight of the heavy .45 in his coat pocket brought a tight smile to his thick lips. He looked at the back of the old man's print shop.

The blind was pulled low but a crack of lamplight showed under it. That meant that old Rakestraw was working late putting the final touches on tomorrow's *Independent*. It was but the work of a moment to fit the key to the back-door's lock and step inside.

Old Rakestraw was seated on a high stool at his bench. He turned when Jack Hartman entered but he did not get off the stool. Hartman took in the room with one glance. Rakestraw was alone; he had been working on a stick of type, setting it by hand.

"How'd you get in?" asked Rakestraw.

Hartman said, "Through the door. Can't you see?"

"But I have the only key in town that fits that door."

"You *did* have the only key," corrected Hartman. "When you were out for supper one of my men slipped over and took a mold of the lock."

"Then he made a key?"

Hartman nodded. "He's purty good at that. In fact, he made a key that got him outa the pen. My men are purty useful, old man."

Rakestraw nodded slowly. The full significance of Hartman's coming had soaked into him. Hartman, he knew, meant to kill him. But if Hartman expected to see fear in Rakestraw's eyes he was mistaken. Those eyes were emotionless. They were the serene eyes of a man who had met many situations and conquered them; they unnerved Hartman slightly.

"I reckon they sure are," said Rakestraw. "They can make other things besides keys. They can change the brands on cattle an' rob banks an' stages an' light fires. Yes, an' some of them seem pretty handy with their guns, too."

"You forgot somethin'," reminded Hartman.

"Yeah? An' that?"

"They make good editorial copy, too." Hartman lifted the .45 from his pocket. The gun had a silencer and that made it look bigger. Old Rakestraw's hand stopped halfway to the closed drawer of his bench. "Just leave your gun in that drawer, Rakestraw!"

Rakestraw drew his hand back, empty. "So you came to kill me, huh?"

"I have to kill you," breathed Hartman. "You make me kill you, ol' man. I've warned you too many times already. If you had thrown your paper into line with me and the Frontier-

street bunch we could clean up; but you didn't. You took it upon yourself to bring what you call 'law an' order' into Lone Pine. You crossed my path too many times. An' now you're goin' pay for it!"

RAKESTRAW sat there, looking at the gun. Hartman saw that, even though the man looked into the jaws of death, there was little change in him. His mouth was a little tighter and his eyes had narrowed slightly. Outside of that his demeanor had changed little. A feeling of admiration started to grow in Hartman but he put it down suddenly.

Rakestraw turned on the stool and went to work with his type. "You'll never get away with it," he said.

"Why not?"

"Somebody'll hear the report."

Hartman laughed softly. "Not with this silencer on my gun. And if it does make any noise the sounds from Frontier street'll kill it out."

Rakestraw made no answer and Hartman was silent for a long moment. The sounds of Frontier street—a block away—came seeping through the thin walls. Hartman made no move to break into it. It was a mixture of sounds: drunken shouts, blurry music, and then two gunshots punctuated it. The silence was heavy for a long moment and then the revelry went into action again.

"Another man killed," said Rakestraw. "Killed in the lair of the devil, killed in a hell-hole spawned by sin and avarice and greed. Life is cheap on your street, Hartman."

"Life is always cheap," said Hartman. A sudden irritation rose in him. He'd get this over with and be gone. He'd spent too much time now. He eared the hammer back and the click brought Rakestraw looking up from his type.

"You could have sent one of your hired gunhands to kill me."

Hartman's voice was husky. "I've reserved that for myself. Nobody but me will ever know an' I'll never talk. A hired hand might get drunk, or get cold feet, an' do some waw-wawin'."

"I've been expectin' you before."

"I've given you time," said Hartman. "Thought mebbe you'd get some brains in your skull an' give up your reformation campaign. Then I heard today you was enlistin' the preacher an' the sheriff to join hands an' start a vigilance committee. You seem awful interested in that story you're settin'. That the one about the committee?"

"It's locked up already." Rakestraw nodded toward a case filled with type. Hartman glanced at it and then pulled the trigger. The gun made a small crackle and old Rakestraw slid forward against his desk. He hung that way for a long moment and then his muscles relaxed and he slid to the floor without disturbing his stick of type. He landed hard on the floor and Hartman moved over and looked down on him.

THE sight was sickening but it brought no change to Hartman's features. Rakestraw was dead. No man can live with a bullet tearing out his brains. Despite his huge bulk, Hartman worked quickly. Rakestraw's gun was in the drawer. It, too was a .45, and he kicked a bullet out of it, put it in his pocket. Then he took the spent bullet from his own gun and crammed it into Rakestraw's. Stooping, he pushed the gun into the old man's limp right hand, curling the fingers around the stock. Hartman straightened, breathing a little too heavily, and gave the picture a cursory glance. Suicide would be the verdict.

He picked the loaded case of type up and unlocked it, dumping its contents into the hell box. Nobody would ever read that story. The copy was on a hook beside the proof roller; he took it, glanced at it, crammed it into his pocket. The type was, of course, upside down, but Hartman could read it rather rapidly.

What he read made a wide smile grow on Hartman's lips. Old fool, had been setting want ads. There were about nine lines in the stick and Hartman read about six of them when the knocking on the door interrupted him.

"Open up, dad," a girl's voice said. "Here's your lunch."

Hartman moved silently to the back door, and went outside. He tested the door, seeing it was locked. Then he went down the alley and halted in the shadows and watched the girl who was now pounding desperately on the front door. A stocky figure of a man came out of the night and halted beside the girl.

"What's the matter, Miss Julie."

"Dad's in there an' he won't open the door. Sheriff, there must be something wrong."

Sheriff Watson pounded on the door. "Open up, Rakestraw." A crowd was growing around the pair and Hartman moved forward and joined it. Watson called four times and then bulled his heavy shoulder against the panel. The second time the door crashed inward and Watson plunged into the room. Hartman entered with the townsmen. When he got inside Julie Rakestraw was kneeling beside her father and weeping. Watson got her to her feet and two men took her outside. Men stared at the dead man and held their tongues in awe.

Hartman spoke. "What happened, sheriff?"

Watson was kneeling beside Rakestraw. He glanced up at Hartman, making no effort to hide his dislike. "What do you think?" he asked cynically.

Hartman shrugged. "He's killed himself."

Somebody said, "It sure looks like it. Sheriff." The man scratched his head thoughtfully. "But it doesn't seem reasonable. Ol' Rakestraw was a fighter an' I can't imagine him goin' out this way."

Sheriff Watson got to his feet and walked to the back door and tested it. "Locked," he muttered.

"Suicide, then," said another man.

WATSON looked at Hartman and Hartman felt his blood move slightly. Then he held his emotions: he had nothing to fear. He had taken the precaution to hide the .45 and silencer back in the alley. All he had was his hideout gun—a derringer—up his right sleeve.

"You're on the wrong side of town, Hartman," said Watson.

Hartman said, "This is a free country, fella."

Their gazes locked and both felt the other's hate. A man moved forward, evidently intending to move old Rakestraw's body, and Watson said, "Leave him there, Jim." The man moved back.

Still Watson stood looking at the dead man. His eyes lifted then and rested briefly on the stick of type. Then he walked over to the press and Hartman's heart, for some reason, started beating more steadily. The p[illegible] was empty and Watson looked at the frame that Hartman had emptied into the hell box.

"Funny," he said softly. "I was in here twenty minutes ago and ol' Rakestraw had that form full an' ready to print. Now it's in the hell box." He shook his head sadly. "Musta butched it up an' decided to re-set it."

"Suicide," a man murmured.

Watson nodded. Hartman had seen enough; he turned to leave. He was almost to the door when Watson's voice whirled him around. "Come here, Hartman!"

Something icy cold gripped Hartman's spine. He stood and looked at Watson. "What do you want?"

"Come here," said Watson.

Hartman shrugged and grinned at a man. "Have to humor the nitwit," he said. He made his exterior a smooth easy mask but inside his guts were a tight ball. He went over to Watson and said, "Well, tin star?"

"Can you read a stick of type?"

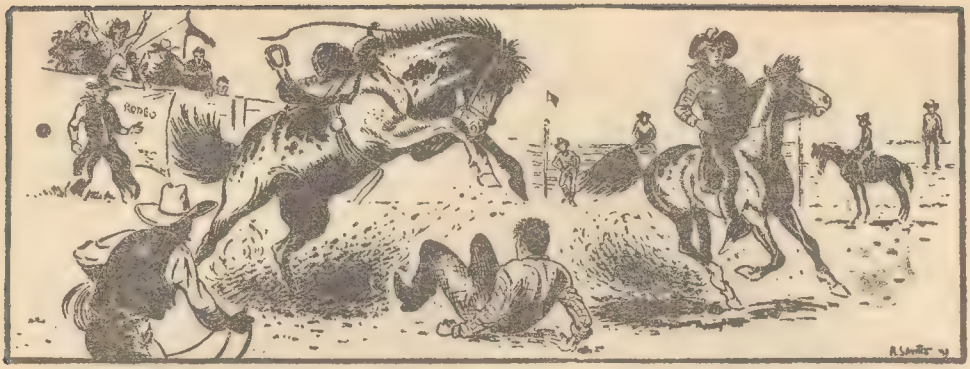
"A little. Why?"

"Read that stick."

Hartman looked cooly at Watson. "You gone crazy?" Nevertheless he read and as he read his impatience and nervousness grew. He skimmed through the want ad and his eyes riveted on the last few lines. The full significance of them wavered into his brain and froze into rigid lines of doom.

Hartman moved quickly. His right hand rose and the derringer squirted lead. The bullet caught Watson in the shoulder. Watson's gun was rising and Hartman shot again. Only this time his bullet went into the

(Continued On Page 90)



WILD WEST QUIZ

By Idaho Bill

Turn to Page 94 for Answers

1. If you wanted a *dogie*, how would you go about getting it?
   - Set a trap for it
   - Put salt on its tail
   - Rope it
   - Fish for it

2. When the trapper said he was going to "raise hair" he meant that he was going to
   - scalp an Indian
   - skin an animal
   - plant a garden
   - get a hair-cut

3. Which expression was used in the Wild West to mean sudden and violent death?
   - Cash in
   - Pass out
   - Kick the bucket
   - Die with the rawhides on

4. Between 1840-1880 the expression "gone to Texas" became famous for the simple reason that
   - Texas was a good State to settle in
   - everyone went there
   - there was no other place to go
   - it was a refuge for the wild and lawless

5. Which of these did the westerner cover with when he slept in a *Tuscon bed*?
   - A mattress
   - The sky
   - A tarp
   - Blankets

6. The word *baile* means dance, but what did *bronco baile* mean fifty years ago?
   - A madhouse
   - A wild horse dance
   - A stag dance
   - An Indian dance

7. To the prospector, *belly timber* meant
   - food
   - the ribs
   - heavy logs
   - stunted shrubbery

8. Mexican cowbys are called
   - *muchachos*
   - *gauchos*
   - cowboys
   - *vaqueros*

9. The trapper gave the name *plew* to his
   - beaver skins
   - buffalo gun
   - bedding
   - buckskin suit

10. *Mexican iron*, extensively used on the frontier seventy-five years ago, was the material known as
    - iron
    - wood
    - rawhide
    - tin

BIRDS DON'T DRINK LIKKER

Here is another Tall one by
The author of "Bronc-Bustin' Gobbler," etc.

JOE AUSTELL SMALL

SIM JENKINS steps out of the Rusty Bucket Saloon and stands there sizing up the resters scattered up and down the boardwalk. He's swaying hindways and to the sides a little, and there's that blissful smile on the old maverick's face.

Sim hasn't stepped out quite far enough from the swinging batwing doors. One claps him sharply on the right hind pocket, and Sim jerks frontward sort of crazy. He glances back then and kicks out with his left foot. Sim shies out to the side a little then and whinneys like a scared horse. The street resters laugh, and Sim puts on some more show, making out like he's a nervous nag and is scared of that swinging door.

Shug Saunders looks at me and shakes his head sadly.

"Look at him now," Shug grieves. "'Leven months ago he'as one of the best cow hands and chaparral racers in Soapstone County! Now," Shug's eyes clouds, "he's the leading bar fly in the whole state!"

We both shake our head together. It's bad to see an old friend sliding into the slaughter house like that—'specially a member of the famous Scrub Oak Ranch. Old Bill Shanks started that ranch forty-one years ago with me and Shug and Sim as his hands. He never added or fired a hand, and we never changed jobs in all the forty years it lasted. It got to be a sort of legend thing there in Soapstone County, the way folks got to talking about it. And we aimed to keep it up for another forty years, but Sim got a couple too many under his belt before the chaparral race last year and busted up the whole thing. Like the rest of us, Sim's taken it pretty hard. But he can't help things any by biting the stopper like he has.

After his show's over, Sim walks on down the boardwalk toward us. There's a silly smile on his face. He sees us and nods his hello. Then Sim stops sudden, spraddles his legs and dodges back like a bronc meeting the wrong end of a polecat. He grasps Shug's arm and points up that narrow alley between the Rusty Bucket and Lard Bagget's feed store. There's a wild look in the man's eyes.

"How many snakes do you see yonder, Shug?" he asks, his lips tight as he waits for the verdict.

SHUG winks serious at me. I reckon he figures it's about time we started scaring Sim up over that heavy drinking. It might make him quit. I'd heard of such things before.

"Five, ain't they, Mournful?" he looks at me to stand his hand.

"Yeah, they's five," I say. "Big devils too, ain't they, Shug?"

"Five?" Sim says unbelieving. He looks bumfuzzled. "I could a'sworn I saw just three! Guess I need another drink!" Sim turns around then and walks back toward the Rusty Bucket, wiping his head with a sweaty bandana as he goes.

"Shug," I say, after I watch Sim

stumble back through the batwing doors, "we got to do somethin' about that 'poke. Maybe it wouldn't put Bill Shanks back on his Scrub Oak spread, but it would at least keep an old time saddle friend from goin' slap to the dogs."

"We ought to do somethin' all right," Shug admits. "But what?"

"I'm thinkin'," I say as we walk on toward the Rusty Bucket.

Hugh Bankston is there, leaning his belly against the bar, and watching Sim with a sort of smirk on his face. Sim hasn't seen the Soggy Biscuit owner yet, but pretty soon he does. I know there is going to be trouble then. So Shug and me close in fast.

Sim stops in mid-motion, like his nose is about to nudge the sharp end of a wasp, when he sees Hugh Bankston. He stands there a minute, stiff as a tombstone. Then the tall 'poke rumbles out a beller from way down deep. He grabs the slim end of a rye bottle and starts toward the big man. I see Hugh Bankston's nervous hand dip uneasily, and I dive for Sim. It's not that I want to stave off a licking for Bankston. I'm just afraid he'll throw a slug at Sim and call it self defense.

But Shug has already beat me to it. He hangs the top sole of a boot in the way of Sim's progress, and the poke falls heavily. He bumps his head on the footrail and goes out pretty enough.

"Can't hold his likker, eh?" Bankston smiles and relaxes. "Used to be a right good racer too."

"Still is the best blamed racer in this here county!" I say, my face warming over.

"He didn't show up so good last year," Bankston smiles again. This one is a slow and devilish smile.

IT MAKES me and Shug see red. Hugh Bankston tricked us out of that race last year, and we know it; and he tricked old Bill Shanks slick out of the Scrub Oak spread. Bankston guyed old Bill about having a sorry bird and handler. He got old Bill whopping mad—and all the time he was feeding the Scrub Oak ramrod on that funny acting whiskey. Old Bill got a little reckless for the first time in his life. He knew blamed well that this bird of ours could win. Too, the likker was warming him up fast. His hot temper and dislike of Hugh Bankston on top of that done the trick. He bet the Scrub Oak Spread against half of Hugh Bankston's bigger ranch on that race.

Well, Sim took a few drinks with what we later figured to be one of Bankston's paid dirties and when he walked out on the track, Sim was weaving like a hungry spider. He got too anxious and loud with his bird and lost the race. Old Bill moved to his brother's ranch up on the Yellow Fork then, and we got jobs with other outfits. We wouldn't work for Hugh Bankston after a deal like that. Even yet, every time we think of the look on old Bill Shanks' face when he pulled out north that day, it makes me and Shug and Sim want to plant a roll of lead somewhere inside that fat belly Bankston totes around.

"He can still outrace anything you got to show!" I throw at Bankston as a comeback to him saying Sim didn't show out good last year.

"Wouldn't want to back up your holler with something solid, would yuh?" The big blubber bag laughs again. "I'll match anything you put up!"

Shug looks at me quickly. The color drains from his face. "I got a ranch in South Texas I might match against the Scrub Oak if you're not just battin' your gums to show off!"

Hugh Bankston's face flushes a little after he gets over blinking out a quick sparkle of surprise. Hugh is a man who plays to the crowds. He'd rather lose every dollar he owns than be known to back down on something—especially to a two-bit cowboy.

"I think you're braggin'," Bankston says when he gets over the jolt. "But if you can show me papers on such a ranch, I'll make the bet."

"It's a deal then," Shug drawls slowly. The big cowboy looks like

he's just seen his own skeleton walk across the bar room floor.

"Why you old reprobate!" I say light-like as we come out of the Rusty Bucket and mosey down the boardwalk. "What'cha been tryin' to do—hold out on us? You ain't really got a ranch there, have you, Shug?" I get serious on that last sentence, figuring this is no time for jokes—especially about a ranch in South Texas. It's not right to get a man's hopes up like that, even Shug's best pal, which is me.

"No, I haven't—exactly," Shug enlightens. "But I will have. Got a uncle down around Live Oak that's willed his ranch to me. He aims to die in a year or so. Might get him to make the papers out to me now—not to be good until he kicks off. Unk's a pretty good old cuss. He'll do it if he knows it's important enough. By puttin' up our hosses, guns, all spare cash, and everything else we got, it ought to match worth with the Scrub Oak. Bankston might bet on a deal like that."

"You're takin' a mighty big risk, Shug," I say serious.

Shug Saunders leans agin a hitching post. He looks out across the dusty streets of Clay Station. Shug don't say anything for a long time.

"Yes, I am," the big poke finally drawls. "But 'twould sure be nice to work a man's time out on a ranch like the Scrub Oak, and for a man like old Bill Shanks. . . ."

WHEN we step into the Rusty Bucket again, it's like we've had all the dead hide peeled off us and come out new men. Our eyes are sparkling, and there's a suddenness to our talk. Sim has got his eyes behind him again and is pouring another drink.

"Don't do it, Sim!" Shug says. "Don't drink no more!" Then he tells Sim what we've got in mind.

"The slim poke's eyes look excited. "I'll do it!" He says resolved. "I'll race him again. Have a drink, boys. Le's celebrate!"

Reasoning, threatening, talking—it don't do any good. Sim's got to give up drinking; that's a known fact. But Sim's too easy going, and likker's already got too hard a hold on him. Sim means to. He's always gonna quit after the next drink.

"That's our one drawback," I say to Shug as we walk down the street again trying to figure something out. "I don't think we can make him quit likker!"

"Ain't but one way to do it as I see," Shug says after figuring a spell. "We got to scare it out of him. That's the only way we ever got anything out of him before. Come on."

We walk back into the Rusty Bucket, and there is Sim leaning back in a chair with his feet propped up on the little partition that separates the store part of the business and the bar. He's asleep and snoring right sharply. Shug studies awhile, smiles and winks at me. He walks over and whispers something into Bud Turner's ear. The Rusty Bucket owner smiles and glances at Sim. He disappears for a minute. When he comes back, Bud's got a little drill and a screw driver in his hands.

Shug goes to work. He drills a couple of holes from the other side of the partition straight toward Sim's feet. When they barely break through, Shug reaches for the screwdriver. He takes a couple of wood screws and sends them tight through these holes and into the soles of Sim's boots. The likkered poke don't even wake up while we press his boot soles to the wall so the screws will catch.

Shug motions to one of the onlookers then and a smiling cowpoke bumps against Sim's chair.

"Git out of the way!" he says strong.

Sim opens his eyes, shakes his head and says simply. "Aw, hesh up!"

Sim stretches then, gapes and humps his back like he aims to get up. The slim poke looks surprised, blinks his eyes, rairs back, and humps big this time. He hollers then.

"My gawd, boys!" Sim allows, staring blare-eyed at his feet, "I'm plumb paralyzed! Can't even move my legs!"

Me and Shug move over in a hurry.

"I knowed it would come to this," Shug opines serious. "It'll do it ever time when a man drinks that rotgut likker too long!"

"Hold him steady!" I caution Shug. "Maybe with a good night's rest he'll come out of it."

According to plan, Bud Turner is already around behind the partition. He loosens the screws when we knuck the wall twice. We take Sim to the back room then, making careful to hold his legs stiff.

The slim poke is taking it pretty hard.

"I'll never take another swaller 'long as I live!" he declares. "I rather it'd a 'kilt me than to left me stove up to where I can't never take another step. My gawd, boys! It's turrible! Take it easy there! My legs hurt clean up to the roots!"

SIM JENKINS is a right happy man when he wakes up next morning and finds out that he can walk again.

"Sometimes it'll act that way," Shug explains. "That's just the first stages. It hits you for awhile and then lets go. But if a man keeps on drinking—wham! It'll hit sometime and won't let go!"

"It ain't gonna hit me no more!" Sim allows. "I won't give it a chance. I don't aim to walk around the rest of my life on a wheel chair. Man couldn't even ride a hoss. From now on all I'm gonna drink is water—and I'm a little bit shaky about even that!"

And Sim sticks to it too. He stays sober as a hoot owl and works day in and day out with that road runner bird. Sim says old 000 is a little rusty, but by running time, three weeks from now, he'll have the bird in fine shape.

000 used to be called Scrub Oak. Each bird is supposed to be named after the ranch he represents. And since all the land me and Sim and Shug own would add up to three zeroes, or triple nothing, we just call the bird 000.

Of course, Shug owns his uncle's ranch in a way, and then again he don't. It worries us a right smart. We don't know how the old man's gonna take to this wild plan of ours.

ME AND Shug make a trip down to see his uncle. The old man won't listen to us at first. But after Shug argues, talks, groans, and pleads some more, old Jim Leadbetter finally comes across. He cusses and rairs around some, saying that he'd aimed for the ranch to mean security and peace to Shug for the rest of his life. But if the senseless poke wants to gamble it off, effective after old Jim dies—well, it's no bark off his coffin! He cusses a little more then and calls Shug a blame idiot.

That night after supper Shug grins at me. He says that it's not because old Jim don't give a blame what happens to the ranch. It's just that he's soft way down, sympathizes like hell with what we're trying to do. Too, he seen the race last year and believes 000 can beat Bankston's Soggy Biscuit bird.

So we're all set to go. Shug and Hugh Bankston make the bets legal, and we wait for the racing day, our blood pounding higher and higher all the time. We treat Sim and that blamed road runner bird like they are a coupla water bags in a blistering desert. We're depending on them two a right smart.

We wasn't looking for anything to go wrong then. We'd already got through the worst part of the thing. But trouble's got a way of slipping up on a man from the blind side.

We've taken Sim out to the O Bar W. It's the ranch we got a job on after Hugh Bankston took over the Scrub Oak. Sim hasn't worked for months, so he don't have to quit a job to do it. We're taking care of his board and stay and letting the poke put full time in on training that bird up again.

Then Sim wakes up one morning with a look of horror in his eyes. He glances at me and Shug, and the horror look finally melts into a sort of vacant stare.

"I'm not gonna race old 000 in the Chaparral Run come Sat'day," he announces simply. We know by the way he says it that Sim has made up his mind.

"You'll feel better after three eggs and a couple cups of coffee," Hugh says. "you've been workin' too hard out in that hot sun. Sort of goin' to your head."

"It's not the sun," Sim declares. "It's just that I been thinkin'. Sort of studied it out while I'as dreamin'. If something'ud go wrong and I lost the race again, it'd be me what lost old Bill his Scrub Oak spread and me what lost you your South Texas ranch. I'd feel as bad about that as I did about losin' out for old Bill—and no mortal man could stand to feel twice as bad as I have this last year!"

"Well, out with it," Shug says, his voice sounding like it's dodging a nine plat. "What did you dream?"

SIM mortally believes in dreams. He claims they never fail him. If he dreams something is gonna happen a certain way, it's just gonna happen that way. That's all.

"I dreamed me an' old 000 was there behind the Soggy Biscuit bird at the finish line," Sim confesses. "It ain't no use, boys. It's some more of their skull-duggery!"

"Yeah, but we're watching night and day for that skull-duggery this time," Shug says. "They're not gonna trick us into anything like they did before."

"It was in the dream," Sim says, "plain as day!"

It's no use. When Sim Jenkins makes up his mind, it's as hard to change as a one cent piece. He says me or Shug can handle that bird. He just don't aim to be the cause of another lost ranch.

We argue, reason, cuss and even beg him, but Sim sticks to his decision. So, me and Shug go out to have a hand at bird racing. We feel lower than a starving vegetarian at a chicken roast.

Now chaparral racing ain't a general known thing. It's funny that such a thing got started in Soapstone County anyhow. I don't know, it may not be done any other place in the world. But the way it's put on here once a year, the thing's a heap of fun.

Each ranch has an entry. They got a special cowboy on every spread that is known as "Feathers." He trains the swift-legged road runners for the race. The track itself is just a big circle out on the bald prairie. The birds are put in the middle of it with their handlers, a gun is shot and the first bird over is the winner. The handler can do anythng to his bird but pick the critter up and carry it.

So the main trick in this kind of racing is to train your bird to run in a straight line, it's just a matter of which can outrun which.

But it don't hardly ever go that way. Something always happens. The birds get excited, start circling and dogging. It's generally rip-roaring fun to watch didoes the chaparrals and the cussing pokes pull off trying to get lined out!

It don't take us long to find out that there's more to this bird racing than we'd figured. First, it's mighty important that the bird and his handler be on mighty good speaking terms. And chaparrals don't make friends quick. They're cranky birds too. You got to start off easy. Not push them too much on the build up. And even after you get a bird stretched out on a long run, just one little wrong movement, side step, or moving in too close will cause him to go off course. It's a mighty ticklish business if ever I saw one.

AFTER the first day at it there's a look on Shug Saunders' face like he just mistook a glass of vinegar for cold beer.

"Sim," he says at the supper table that night. "Sim, for gawd's sake, quit that fangdanglin' around and run this bird for me. I'm goin' crazy. I never thought as good a friend as you would back out on me at a time like this! You're letting' us all down, Sim!"

"No, I'm not," Sim declares. "I'd be lettin' you down if I run that

race! Like I said, I'll stay here and do all I can every way. But I don't aim to run that bird. Wasn't nothin' in the dream about you. You got a chance to win."

Friday evening Shug's just plum frazzled out.

"I'll never make it, Mournful," he allows. "The bet's done been made. If this bird don't run, Hugh Bankston wins hands down. But I'm might nigh in the frame of mind not to run at'tall! That blasted bird zigs off course if I bat my left eyelash too hard. He zags to one side if I turn my head, and he plumb falls to pieces, cuts, and curves if I press him too close. Makes me want to climb a dead snag, pull my hair, and scream at the birds!"

"You *got* to run him, Shug!" I say. "Four lives'ud be ruined if you don't, and your unk would bust a blood vessel. Besides, we'll lose everything we ever had or even thought about!"

"That Sim!" Shug raves. "He'll lose his own horse, 'n gun, 'n catch rope—an' still he won't change his mind!"

"Hold on there a second," I say. "I'm thinkin'!"

Shug holds on and I think it out. Looks like our only chance. I remember one time we was trying to get Sim to ride old Hoarse Throat in the donkey race at the Ranchman's Races. He wouldn't do it at'tall, saying a thing like that wasn't dignified. Then we feed the poke a little tiger milk and he's plumb ready to ride any donkey in the country in less'n an hour.

I tell Shug about this and a hopeful glint enters his eyes.

"It might be worth it," Shug agrees. "He'd have a better chance winning the race drunk than I would sober!"

So next day about two hours before starting time we mosey up the street toward the saloon. Sim don't even want to go in at first, but we lead the poke inside, saying we'll just get a couple of quick ones and of course he won't have to drink at'tall.

Now it's mortally hard to get that first drink down the tall poke. He swares it'll paralyze him and maybe sprout a case of lockjaw besides. So finally that desperate look comes to Shug's eyes and he tells Sim about that joke we played on him. Sim looks unbelieving at first. We even show him the filled-in holes in the bottom of his boots and in the walls. The tall poke starts to get mad about it then, but I remind him of a good one he pulled on Shug and me once and he sort of chuckles a little.

"The drinks are on me 'n Mournful!" Shug says, laughing. "We finally got it back on you!"

So finally and at last Sim takes a drink.

An hour and a half later he agrees to run that bird.

WE'RE not sure whether Sim can trot fast by now, much less run, but we're afraid to sober him up much for fear he'll back out. He's plumb forgot that dream, looks like, and is rairing to go.

It's a big crowd out there on the center of the track by the time we get there. In a chaparral race, the crowd always gets right there in the

BRUNO FISCHER

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center of the big circle so they can see the race good, no matter which way it goes. And sometimes it goes in all directions!

When Sim shuffles out on the field with old 000's coop in his arms, there's a light chuckle of laughter. It rises into a roar when the tall poke sits the coop down and bows gracefully.

In five more minutes they're ready to go. There are five entries in the race this year. The five coops are set together, and when the gun fires, each handler is supposed to lift the lid and get his bird out and off to a good start as quickly as possible.

He's got to keep a close eye on his bird too. A chaparral looks about as much like another chaparral as anything I ever looked at. The handlers have got to pick out some lighter spot, peculiar feathers, or some mark to make them recognize their bird. If a handler runs the wrong bird over the finish line, he's just won for another ranch, that's all. The identifying official numbers are on a spot under the birds' wings.

Well, sir, when the gun fires, Sim opens the door fast and old 000 walks out into the light, blinking his eyes. He twists his neck and looks back of him. That's when he might nigh falls over. The bird rights himself, takes a few steps and just about tips over again. It's enough to pop a man's eyeballs. The bird is roaring drunk!

The other handlers are trying to get their birds strung out but are having trouble.

"Why you consarned old sot!" Sim addresses the chaparral. "You dadblasted drunkard!" He starts in after the bird then.

Old 000 tries to dodge, slips over on his side and throws out a wing to save an outright fall. He rights himself then and staggers over toward the group of agitated handlers that are trying to separate their birds and get them stretched out.

"You can't fool me!" Sim shakes his finger at the retreating bird. "Birds don't drink likker! You're just puttin' on. I'll show you how to mess with me!" He makes a reckless charge at the unsteady bird.

000 busts square into the melee of birds and handlers. They flush. Sim hits them a second wallop. Two of the men go down. The birds separate in a wild flurry. They're going toward the crowd—just the opposite direction from which they are supposed to go.

"Head him off!" Sim yells at anybody in general. "He's tryin' to get smart with me in his old age!"

I get a glimpse of Hugh Bankston in the crowd then. He don't know whether to laugh or look worried. It's no doubt in our minds that one of his men managed to likker up some food and feed our bird just before the race. How he done it, we haven't figured out yet.

THE crowd goes plumb crazy with the birds darting in and out and the handlers running over everybody that gets in their way. Dry caliche dust rises in the hot, sticky air. A woman screams. A horse whinneys and falls back on his haunches. A handler cusses. There's laughing a right smart too. I see Sim astraddle of a fat man's neck, still going after his bird. One of the birds has run between a fat woman's legs. She's got her dress up over hammy knees, running and shouting scared like.

The birds are all mixed up. Two handlers start out after the same chaparral. They stop then and argue a little. Then they start fighting. One poke follows a bird for fifty yards, then wheels, cusses, and starts hunting his own.

But Sim don't have any trouble following his bird. Old 000 is weaving and staggering like a boozed-up poke in a run-away buckboard.

Sim gets his bird straightened out then. Seems like when the bird gets a little speed up he don't sway as much. But my heart loses its bottom when I see Bus Langford up forty yards ahead and to the left with his Soggy Biscuit bird sailing along smooth as clabbered milk. Bankston sees it too, and there's a light in his eyes that'd light a quirly

at twenty feet. Shug shakes is head He's too down at the mouth to say anything.

A forty yard start is just too much. Sim and old 000 are sailing along at a good clip now but they're just simply outdistanced. Our entry hasn't gained five yards on them by the time the Soggy Biscuit bird is twenty yards from the finish line.

I hear Shug sigh. It's the most sorrowful sigh I ever took a listen at. There's a bump in my throat and a burny feeling in my eyes. I'm wondering how it would look for a full grown man to cry right here in front of all these people.

Just as a field judge is raising his red bandana to signify that Soggy Biscuit has won the race, an old stray cur, attracted to the race I expect by all the excitement a minute or so back, starts head on toward the birds, barking and twitching his ears.

The Soggy Biscuit bird falls apart. He ducks to the side, cuts back, then levels out to the left. I'm holding my breath again. Old 000 ought to break any second now.

But he don't.

I guess the bird is feeling pretty bold. He heads right toward that old hound, running like a hi-lifed tomcat. He's roaring drunk and he don't give a hang about such a little thing as a dog in his way.

The big cur jumps aside and whines surprised as the bird passes. They're over the line in another second, a bare half-breath before the Soggy Biscuit bird gets over on his arced course!

WE GO crazy. I beat Shug's back. He throws away a brand new Stetson. He whoops and shoots his gun up in the air.

"Mournful Mason," he says to me, "I'm the happiest man what ever drawed a breath of air!"

His uncle finds us then. The old man is whooping and goosing the ground excitedly with his cane.

In the excitement we've lost sight of Sim and his bird. We chouse around a little but they're nowhere to be found. A smiling poke tells us they kept right on running after they hit the finish line. So me and Shug mount our nags and head in after them.

We find Sim stalking a rock ledge like a hungry lion. The bird is up there under a little rock shelf, cornered. He looks right nervous.

"Actin' like a blamed idjut!" Sim repremands. "I'll teach you to tease me like that. I'll pull every blamed feather out of your tail! I thought it'as about time I worked you over agin!"

Shug looks at me. My eyebrows are lifted too.

"Gawdomighty!" Shug allows. "We won that race on account of Sim tryin' to punish that blamed bird! Blasted chaparral knowed it too! That's why he'as running like a bat out of purgatory and didn't even let a big cur faze him!"

We both laugh. Then Shug calls Sim.

"You dad-blasted idjut!" Shug says, winking at me. "That bird hasn't been teasin' you. You're just so plague goned drunk it just looks like he is!"

We catch and pen the bird. Sim don't say a word on the way back. He's pretty well sweated the likker out of him by the time we ride into town and is just about sober.

"The world's got back to turnin' now!" Shug says, smiling. He leans over and slaps Sim on the back. "Le's go over and scrape the dust out of our throats with a quick one and then go wire old Bill Shanks to come back to his ranch! That's gonna be the happiest day of my life when I see the old man set foot on Scrub Oak soil again!"

"Don't believe I'll take one," Sim says, shaking his head. "Any likker powerful enough to make me see that bird do the things it looked like he done—and all the time him actin' plumb respectful—any likker that strong ain't for my stomach, paralyzin' or no paralyzin'!" He smiles at us a little sheepish. "You boys go ahead and get you a drink. I'll go send that wire to the boss!"

(THE END)

It was a quarter after eight when I came out of the kitchen. Moon was still in his favorite state of being — suspended animation in a soft chair.

"Well, have you solved my problem?" I asked nastily. "What kind of screwball tries to poison you in a room crammed with people and then leaves a note to meet him somewhere so he can kill you?"

Adam Moon opened one blue eye. "There was too much prussic acid in your highball."

"Any amount would have been too much for my taste."

"And," he went on, "it would be far simpler to walk up to you in the street at night and pump you full of lead. It's not very complicated to murder somebody."

I was about to tell him to suggest that to the nut who was after my life, when the phone rang. I answered it.

"Waldo Haggerty?"

The voice that asked the question was hardly human. It had no tone or character, and it seemed to be drifting over the wire from a vast distance.

My fingers tightened on the handset. "Speaking," I said.

"Coward!"

There was a click and the line was dead.

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By Bruno Fischer

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January, 1946 issue of

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COMING NEXT ISSUE

Funeral O'Neill's Trigger Trap

O'Neill's fist smashed against Jake Worth, as Ringbone held Waldo Shane at gun's point.

Complete Action-Packed **Novelet**

By LEE FLOREN

***Jake Worth** and Waldo Shane were a pair of tough hombres — but not tough enough!*

BY THE time the veterinarian and the undertaker had reached Calico town, the chinook wind had melted almost all of the spring snow. Lanky Funeral O'Neill rode deep in his saddle, his homely face serious as he sucked his cold pipe. Never a cheerful man at his best, the long ride had irked him into a fine, thin anger.

"Young Clem Jones'll have a warm fire in his cabin." The undertaker rubbed his bony hands together and looked at fat Ringbone Smith. "And he'll have a nip of something strong to put heat in the bones of an old body-snatcher like me."

"Hope so, Funeral." The heavy-set vet licked his lips. "But just to make sure, let's step into a bar for a shot of forty-rod first."

They rode into the town livery-barn and dismounted. The hostler and a short, wiry oldster came out of the office. Funeral saw that the old gent bore all too plainly the marks of a professional panhandler, a range bum.

"Plenty of hay for our horses," he told the hostler. "And oats, too."

The hostler nodded, took a hay-fork, and went out back to the hay-stack. The short oldster's eyes gleamed and he showed a patronizing smile.

"Howdy, men. I'm Grizzly Ike. How about a drink, huh?"

Funeral flipped him two-bits; the scarecrow tossed it back. His thin voice held a rim of anger. "I said a drink, and I meant to pay for it."

"Never drink with strangers," grunted the undertaker.

Funeral went outside, Ringbone following. One practiced glance, cast across this boom town, showed the gold rush was in full progress. Tents and log buildings made of green pine lined the base of the gully. Lumbering wagons had carved deep ruts along the twisting mainstem.

They went down the muddy street and entered the Wishbone Bar. "A kick of somethin' strong," said Funeral.

Bad weather had driven a few of the less hearty miners indoors. Now they gambled at yonder tables, drank at the bar. Funeral, in the act of lifting his glass, felt the tug against his elbow, and he lowered his whiskey. Scowling fiercely, he glared at the man who had tugged him—the wizened, dried-up scarecrow from the livery.

"What'd you want?" he demanded.

"I wanta talk to you."

Funeral studied him. "Get away," he said. "We don't cater to bums an' moochers; if you want a drink—"

"T'hades with a drink!" rasped the oldster. His thin, nasal voice held anger. "You're Funeral O'Neill, ain't you? An' this round gent here is your pard, Ringbone Smith. You're from Cottonwood town, up in Montana."

"How'd you know who we were?"

"Clem Jones told me you was comin'."

"Who are you?"

"I bin tryin' to tell you. You see, me an' Clem's partners."

Funeral nodded, pushed fresh burley into his pipe. "Shoulda tol' us before, Grizzly. Sorry we pushed you aroun'. Belly up an' have a drink. How's Clem? His wife have her baby yet? His letter said—"

"Clem," said Grizzly Ike, calmly, "is down the street right now—in the hotel—You see, he couldn't come to meet you; he's almost dead."

"Dead?" asked Funeral.

"Now what the—?" demanded Ringbone Smith. "We got his letter about a week ago, askin' us to come over here—said he had a claim an' highjackers were tryin' to get it—What happened?"

GRIZZLY IKE drained his glass. "A short story, and tragic. Me an' Clem hit Discovery crick, right on Clem's range. Sure now, we quit the cow bizness then, an' took to minin'. An' two days ago somebody roll' a rock down on Clem. Came off one of the high ridges, as he was ridin' into town— Killed his hawss."

"Maybe," ventured Ringbone, "the rock slipped of its own accord."

"Not with Jake Worth wantin' our claim."

"Jake Worth?" queried Funeral O'Neill. "Who's he?"

"That's him," said Grizzly Ike, "over there against yonder wall. The

gent settin' beside him is Waldo Shane, his righthand man."

Funeral turned and looked. Jake Worth met his glance, got to his feet, and lumbered toward him, his long arms hanging. Squat, heavy, he weighed almost three hundred, and his beefy face set low on wide, thick shoulders.

Waldo Shane, thin, spidery, came up, moved in beside Ringbone Smith. Jake Worth placed his bulk against the bar, glanced at Funeral O'Neill, then let his gaze rest on Grizzly Ike.

"This ol' fossil," he rumbled, "is tellin' the same story, I reckon? Accusin' me, Jake Worth, of rustlin' Clem Jones' mine. Maybe now he even blames me for that boulder that almost kilt Clem . . ."

Grizzly Ike stuck out his bearded jaw. "Wouldn't put it beyon' ya, Jake Worth. I've seen plenty of your highhanded—"

The grizzled oldster's words died short. Jake Worth's right hand, huge knuckles showing, had twisted into the oldster's shirt-front, cutting off his wind.

"I've got a notion to beat your—"

Jake Worth's thick left fist drew back. But his blow did not smash into the helpless Grizzly Ike's thin face. Funeral O'Neill jerked the heavy man around, twisted him savagely, and Jake Worth gave Grizzly Ike a push. The prospector went back, fell over his feet, and sat down.

"You lookin' for trouble, O'Neill?" he grunted.

"Where I come from," said the undertaker, "they don't push old men around."

Jake Worth hit, then. His mauling blow traveled swiftly despite the man's size, but not quickly enough to catch Funeral O'Neill off-guard. Already the lanky man's fist beat hard against Jake Worth's jaw.

Funeral put all he owned behind his fist. Jake Worth was solid, tough; if he could be hurt, now would be the time. But with sickening emotion the undertaker knew he had not hurt Jake Worth.

Worth moved ahead, feet shuffling, fists up. Now Funeral, moving quickly despite his fifty odd years, went back before the mauling fists. A hurried glance showed him that Ringbone Smith had his .45 stuck into Waldo Shane's ribs, and dimly he heard his partner's words of encouragement.

"Let him have it, Funeral!"

A fist hit Funeral on the jaw. He felt himself going back, and he held himself against the wall. Jake Worth took up a steady shuffle, pursuing the retreating undertaker. His breath was harsh, whistling.

Suddenly, the heavy man's wind left him, and Funeral came in hitting. But still Jake Worth pushed ahead. Funeral saw the blow coming, tried to duck. . .too late; he went down.

They rolled in the sawdust. Miners shouted encouragement. They spilled a table, sending cards and chips scattering. Funeral knew now he could not whip Jake Worth with his fists. He grabbed a chair, bent it over the man's flat head. Jake Worth grunted, and lay flat.

Funeral got to his feet, brushing sawdust from him. Waldo Shane's voice was a sullen growl. "Big Jake Worth'll never forget that," he said.

"Take his gun, Grizzly," said Funeral. The oldster threw it in a corner and Ringbone reholstered his cutter. The disarmed Waldo Shane glared wordlessly at them.

They went out the door, Grizzly Ike in the lead. Ringbone glanced at the unconscious Jake Worth. "Only way to stop him was with a chair," he said. "Too big to stop with your fists, Funeral."

"A bullet could stop him," murmured Funeral.

Clem Jones' homely face sported a grin when he saw the two partners, but behind that twisted smile Funeral O'Neill detected a tinge of pain. "Figured you two'd hail in pronto," the youth said. "Did I mention my pard, Grizzly IkKe, in my letter?"

Funeral shook his cadaverous head. "But we met each other, as you see." He told him about his run-in with Jake Worth. "This Worth hombre trying' to get your mine?"

"Tryin'," grunted Clem, rolling on his side, "he's done already succeed-

(Continued On Page 73)

COMING NEXT ISSUE

They slid stealthily along a pitted alley to the back of the One-Eye. Baldy took his post at the open window. Jeff and Sam moved along the side of the squat frame building toward the front. Just before turning the corner onto the board walk, Jeff waved at Baldy.

He saw Baldy's right hand, heavily laden with greenbacks, arc swiftly forward.

The clatter of rough voices and laughter inside was abruptly halted, like the stoppage of water from a turned-off faucet. Jeff loosened the gun in the holster of his right thigh, smiling grimly. He could imagine the scene inside, though he could not yet see it.

A man has to be real hungry for money, before he'll hire out as another man's killer, and Luke Beldon's new gang were in that category. They must be staring goggle-eyed at the crisp new bills snowing down all around them, inside there. A free-for-all grabfest would start in another second, once the first man made a move toward those greenbacks.

Jeff heard a throaty voice sputter: "Whaddata know? It ain't rainin' dinero. Outa my way, boys!"

Don't Miss

BRANCH BANK IN BOOTHILL

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FAMOUS WESTERN

(Continued From Page 71)

ed. Doc Martin was just up to see me an' he tells me that Jake Worth has already slapped a pre-emption claim over ours an' our dust'll be his'n."

"He's what!" Grizzly Ike's eyes popped.

Clem repeated his statement.

"Why, I'll—!" Grizzly Ike started for the door, his hand on his ancient hogleg. "I'll salt him—!"

Funeral O'Neill jerked the wiry prospector around. "Watch yourself, fella," he advised. "Don't go off half-cocked. Maybe Jake Worth's wantin' you to do such a thing. . .so's he can kill you."

"But I'll—"

"Sit down, Grizzly," said Clem.

Grumbling in his sparse beard, the grizzled miner took a chair. Ringbone Smith tucked a peppermint in his mouth as he stood beside the window, watching the street below. Funeral slowly loaded his cold pipe.

"How bad you hurt, Clem?"

"Doc Martin says I got some ribs busted. Might have some internal injuries, an' he wants me to take it easy. But by hades, Funeral, there's Mildred—she's over in the hospital at Moose Crick. . . .I gotta be there when the kid is born. An' that'll be next week some time for sure."

"You'll probably make it. Hit a big strike out on Discovery?"

"All the gold you want a few feet under the stream bed. Me an' Grizzly Ike worked it private for a coupla weeks until word got out of the discovery an' the town started fillin' up. Now if Jake Worth's got my claim—"

Funeral sucked his pipe thoughtfully. "You had to file your second papers, I reckon, an' you forgot. That gave Worth a chance to horn in. But the way I figure, he's got to wait a week or so until his claim is verified in the state office. An' a week's quite a while, kid."

Clem Jones lay back, his face white against his pillow, his eyes closed. Pity for the injured youth touched the gaunt, toughened undertaker. Over a decade before a homeless waif had drifted into one of Funeral's and Ringbone's Montana cow-outfits. They'd outfitted him, raised him, sent him to school— A few years before, the wanderlust had got him and he had hit south where he had found this range; the partners had grubstaked him to a small cow-outfit. . . .

"The dirty dogs," said Grizzly Ike.

Funeral shook his head sadly. "But we ain't got no evidence to hold them to in court," he said. "A boulder's a boulder an' they all roll; if one takes to rollin', we can't prove that Worth an' Shane gave it a push. . . ."

"Evidence, hell!" growled Grizzly Ike. "I've took enough off'n them two hellions! I ain't lookin' for evidence—" He muttered into his beard. He stomped up and down the room, looking like a glorified banty rooster. Then he clomped out and they heard his boots descending the stairs.

Ringbone muttered, "He'll get killed."

Funeral lit his pipe. "He'll fortify hisself on likker before makin' a move for his iron. Me, I don't figger this Worth gent will want to kill him."

"Why not?"

"Two reasons. One is that if Grizzly Ike shows up missin' or dead, tongues'll wag an' it will look bad for Worth an' Shane. An' the other reason is this—mind you how Clem just said that him an' Grizzly had worked the claim for some time before their strike leaked out?"

Ringbone frowned. "I don't foller you."

"Maybe you ain't halter-broke," said Funeral. He went to Clem's bunk and felt under the pillow. "He's got his gun," he murmured and then to Ringbone, "Let's mosey around, pard."

THEY ate at the Antler cafe. Steak and beans and plenty of boiling coffee. Grizzly Ike, hunched over a stool, sat at the far end of the counter, spearing at his steak. He lifted bloodshot eyes to the pair, resumed his eating.

"Reckon he don't cotton much to the way we treated him," said Funeral. His deep-set, dead-color eyes roamed the restaurant, landed momentarily on Jake Worth and Waldo Shane, eating in yonder booth. Worth's gaze held his for a while,

and Funeral read the hate written there.

"He don't like you," said Ringbone.

"Maybe he's got a headache," said Funeral dryly.

When they were midway in their meal Grizzly Ike slid off his stool, lurched to the girl and paid her, spilling silver across the counter. Plainly the oldster was under the influence of John Barleycorn. He did not pick up his change; leaving the coins there, he started for Jake Worth and Waldo Shane.

Funeral O'Neill reached out, grabbed him. "Be careful, Grizzly. Don't let the likker in you do your talkin". . . ."

"Leggo a'me!"

But Funeral's scrawny fingers only tightened stronger. Waldo Shane got to his feet, his hand on his holstered gun, and his lips thin and mean.

Shane said, "Turn him loose, O'Neill."

Grizzly Ike twisted, but Funeral held him too tightly. Ringbone Smith had dropped from his stool; he stood now with his back to the counter, hand on his gun. But it was bleak Jake Worth who broke up the argument.

"Sit down, Waldo!" he ordered. "O'Neill, turn that old buzzard aroun', an' start him out of here, or blood will flow. . . ."

Grizzly Ike blabbered, "Your blood, Worth."

"Maybe," clipped Worth, "an' maybe not."

Reluctantly, Waldo Shane sat down. Funeral turned Grizzly Ike and said, "Lissen, fella, take it e— —"

Bloodshot eyes bleered at him. "You on their side," the prospector asked thickly, "or are you on Clem an' mine?"

"You're drunk," muttered Funeral.

"You're no friend of Clem's," growled the irate oldster. "Maybe you aim to get that gold, too. Maybe you intend—" He turned and stomped out, muttering to himself. Soon, through the muffled rain outside, Funeral heard the sound of pounding horse-hoofs. They grew and then ran out into space as the rider left Calico.

"Now where's he goin'?" asked Ringbone. "An' what did he mean when he said maybe we was after that gold, too. What gold?"

"His an' Clem's."

RINGBONE masticated a slab of steak. "I get it," he finally said. "Clem an' Grizzly'll have some go' huh? Gold they mined before Jake Worth an' his outerfit got wind of Discovery creek?"

Funeral sipped his coffee noisely.

"This Jake Worth an' Waldo Shane knew we was comin'. Mind how, in the saloon, Worth said your name?"

"Grizzly Ike's prob'ly blabbed," said the undertaker. "The way the brands read to me, the next move is up to Worth."

Jake Worth and Waldo Shane were leaving the booth. Funeral noticed they acted leisurely, but the gaunt undertaker read a deliberateness in their movements. When they went by Worth stopped, said, "This is a bad town, O'Neill. The altitude is high an' there's a heap of fog. An' seems to me I heard tell your lungs were kinda weak."

"Me, I think it's good air," said Funeral.

Jake Worth studied him under lidded eyes, a studied coolness behind him. Funeral O'Neill felt the keen edge of the massive man's strength, and found it sharp. He was like a rapier—strong, sharp, smooth.

"You've made mistakes before, too . . .I suppose," murmured Jake Worth.

He turned then, and with Waldo Shane trailing, he lumbered out into the rain—a rolling massive piece of flesh, shadowed by the thin, angular gunman. Funeral returned to his steak and finished it silently. Unrest tugged at his squat partner, and the undertaker was quick to sense this. Yet, he lingered over his second cup of coffee, even ordered the third. Outside, dusk gathered, darkened; the rain had settled to a drizzle, hung across the mountains.

Finally the undertaker said, "I guess we've given them enough

time," and he and Ringbone left. At the livery they got fresh horses and then, garbed in oilskins and southwesters, they took to the saddle again.

Ringbone's fat, jovial face showed his wonderment. Peppermint after peppermint found his mouth, rolled and crunched between his molars, adding farther fuel to his thinking p[illegible]ess.

"I reckon you know where we're goin', Funeral?"

"I figure so," said Funeral. He tried to load his pipe, failed. They were on a pine-studded hogback ridge. "Look yonder, veterinary."

Ringbone Smith's seamed eyes followed the undertaker's rigid finger. A few miles away, riding through the mist, he made out the dim forms of two men on horseback. And his eyes, trained to long vision, soon identified them.

"Jake Worth an' Waldo Shane," he muttered. "Now what brings them out into this late afternoon drizzle?"

"Gold. Look yonder, friend."

Funeral's finger lifted, steadied. Now another rider, toiling through the rain, came into Ringbone's sight—a lone rider who headed out fast, pounding his bronc for speed. A man seemingly possessed to ride at such speed on such dangerous, slippery terrain. Either that, or drunk.

"Ol' Grizzly Ike." The veterinarian turned somber eyes on his lanky companion. "Jake Worth and Waldo Shane are trailin' him."

"They figure Grizzly'll take them to the gold."

"An' will he?"

Funeral's thin shoulders rose, fell. "He may be drunk, but he's too wise for that. Maybe I'm wrong, but I figure this way. Lots of that drunkenness back yonder in the eatin' house was faked. An' he mentioned that gold on purpose so Worth an' Shane would be bound to hear him."

Ringbone crunched a peppermint. "But I still don't see."

Funeral explained, patiently, "There's two ways to go about killin' a man. You can walk up an' challenge him an' fight it out or you can lure him into a trap. An' like I've done said, Grizzly Ike's no fool."

Ringbone gulped. "You mean that ol' fossil aims to pull Worth an' Shane into a canyon an' kill 'em?"

"Could be," admitted Funeral. "He thinks a heap of Clem. He aims to take the chore away from Clem because of Mildred an' the baby that's comin'."

Ringbone swore. "By hell, we're ridin' to help him!" He started to swing his bronc. Funeral's bony hand gripped his reins.

"Not so fast, pard. We can't trail in behin' them—they'll see us. We got to loop around an' across the ridges."

"Lead the way, Funeral!"

CATCLAW has a habit of snapping back and stabbing you. And when it is laden with rain, and your bronc is sliding in mud— Funeral O'Neill cursed, raised chilled fingers to his cheek. The catclaw had gouged his bony face.

This was a new country to them, but they pointed wide and rode hard. An hour later, dark shadows in the deepening rain-soaked dusk, the partners drew rein high among the sandstones.

Ringbone shifted, chewed a peppermint. "Darkness comin' on, Funeral. Rain thickenin' an' plenty of mi[illegible] Maybe we rode ahead of 'em or maybe we're still behind' em."

Funeral peered. "Hard to tell," he murmured. Wordlessly he loaded his pipe, then, suddenly he remembered, held the match. "If they was down bel[illegible] they could see the flare of the match."

"Lissen!" snapped Ringbone.

The sharp song of a rifle bullet came through the rain, and hard upon its crash came the short snarl of other rifles. Deep in the canyon below, Funeral saw the stabbing flame of talking guns.

"Ol' Grizzly's done jerked the can off'n the beans," murmured the undertaker. "Mind where those rifle flares were placed, Ringbone? Two up ag'in the canyon's boxwall an' one down it a piece. . . ."

"Ol' Grizzly Ike's lured them past him, then opened fire on 'em. Now the only thing they can do is fight their way out or climb up the can-

yon on foot behind them. That'd put them right below us, huh?"

"That decrepit fool," growled Funeral. "He ain't got a chance."

Ringbone dug for a peppermint under his slicker. "They'll climb up this way an' get up higher than him an' jus' pick him off." He hit the ground beside Funeral, pulled his Winchester .30-30 from saddle-boot.

The gathering dusk and the rain made for limited vision. Below them the guns were yammering. One glance cast across the terrain of brush and scrubpine told Funeral that Ringbone's assumptions were correct.

Already Jake Worth and Waldo Shane, realizing the ancient Grizzly Ike had led them into a trap, had left the bottom of the canyon, were threading their way upward, firing as they climbed. And soon, after they had gained more altitude, they would be above the grizzled miner, and be shooting down on him.

"You take that side," said Funeral O'Neill, "an I'll take this one. . . . Hang to the brush—"

"I've done this before."

Funeral grinned. "Keep your powder dry."

Already Ringbone Smith was moving into the high brush. Funeral turned, and started downslope, slipping in the mud. Rosebushes' thorny branches slapped against his slicker. The firing below, settling to a firing duel, had quietened down. Suddenly it broke loose in a savage burst.

Frowning, Funeral hunkered in the brush, and watched. The positions of Worth and Shane—and that of Grizzly Ike—were marked by powder flashes. Suddenly, Grizzly Ike ceased firing.

The rifles of Worth and Shane spoke angrily, then subsided. Funeral heard Shane's high-pitched, nasal whine. "I think we winged the ol' hellion, Jake." The sound came from his right and sounded about fifty yards away.

Rifle raised, Funeral took a hurried aim that direction, let his hammer fall. He shifted positions, moving behind a huge sandstone. Suddenly, from a point above and to his far right, he saw another rifle shoot flame, and he knew Ringbone had bought chips in this jackpot.

The crash of rifles sounded loudly across the brush. And through it, piercing it sharply, came the startled grunt and cry of Waldo Shane.

"Hey, Jake, there's a coupla gents on the ridge—Firin' at us! Now who do you figure—?"

"O'Neill an' Smith!" hollered Jake Worth. "They've trailed us—maybe they was in with ol' Grizzly on this trap—"

A bullet spanged off the rock beside Funeral. Calmly, the undertaker balanced his rifle, shot three times. He built a square around the spot where Waldo Shane was hidden. He lowered his rifle then, a smile tugging his dead lips, as the startled cry of Shane came to him.

"By hell, Jake, they—"

"Get outa here, Waldo! Make tracks—"

Somewhere, brush was crackling. Boots ground against rock and through the rain came the crackle of brush. Funeral scowled and lowered his rifle. The darkness and the rain made it impossible to shoot any more. Across the canyon, Ringbone had also stopped shooting.

FUNERAL squatted, and listened to the sounds die away. Finally, when he heard only the patter of the rain, he lit a match, cupped it and touched it to his pipe. The wet tobacco sputtered and he drew it into life.

"Hey, Ringbone!"

"Right, here, Funeral."

Soon the brush parted and Ringbone Smith came into the clearing, slicker dripping water. "I think we winged Waldo Shane; I heared him holler. Now what'd you suppose them two hellions'll do?"

"Their broncs are down in the canyon. I reckon they'll leg it back to Calico. A long walk, too, in the rain an' mud."

Ringbone shook his heavy head. "Don't reckon so," he said gloomily. "They ain't givin' up that easy. We better keep one eye peeled on our backtrails."

"An' we better find Grizzly Ike."

"They got him," said Ringbone.

Sliding through wet shale, they descended the canyon wall. Water had seeped through Funeral's slicker-front and his shirt and pants were wet. Despite his cowhide chaps rain had run into his boots, but he had no time to stop and empty them now.

His fingers were numb with cold. Inwardly he cursed his fate. His voice gruff, he voiced his thoughts.

"Everythin' we get into ends up in trouble, Ringbone," he moaned. "Here we come to visit Clem, expectin' a peaceful visit—"

"You wouldn't want it no other way, corrected Ringbone philosophically.

Though he did not voice it, anxiety tugged at the undertaker regarding Grizzly Ike. They stopped once on a ledge, and Funeral cupped his hands and hollered. Grizzly Ike's thin voice, heavy with pain, came back to them.

"That you, O'Neill?"

"Sure is, Grizzly. Where you at?"

"This—a—way—"

The voice came from below and to their left. Once Ringbone slipped, sliding ahead; Funeral caught his fat partner, held him. They found Grizzly Ike under a boulder's protective overthrust.

The bearded miner lay on his side, the ground red under him. His rifle, hammer back, lay beside him, breech covered by water in a small pool. He heard them coming, tried to stir himself to a sitting position, got a ways up; then he went slowly down, but his whiskery lips held a tight smile.

"They got me, men. Bad—"

Funeral knelt beside him, moved him over. Ringbone opened the oldster's slicker, unbuttoned his shirt, ripped a dirty piece of underwear, and the bubbling wound lay bare. The bullet had carved against the oldster's left ribs, knocking the wind out of him and cutting his flesh. Not a serious wound.

"Where's the gold hid, Grizzly?" asked Funeral.

Watery eyes studied him keenly. "What gold?"

Funeral held back his temper. "You know what gold," he said irritably. "You an' Clem Jones got some cached out here in the mountains—gold you took outa your claim. You wasn't drunk when you pulled out of Calico."

The bleary eyes showed admiration. "You sure got a mind on you, O'Neill," the prospector admitted. "Sure, me an' Clem got gold. Lots more hid than there is in the ground in Discovery crick, but only me an' Clem know where it is."

"You won't know long," grunted Funeral.

Naked alarm speared across Grizzly Ike's eyes. "You mean—I'm goin' kick the bucket, O'Neill! My Gawd, don't say that—"

Ringbone chewed a peppermint, his broad forehead showing a deep frown. He knew that Grizzly Ike, given some medical attention, would soon be on the mend. Why then was Funeral scaring him?

Ringbone held his tongue.

Funeral's bony shoulders lifted, fell. "I ain't no doc, but I've seen plenty of dead men—that's my business. An' I've seen many dead with a lot littler hole in 'em than you got—"

Grizzly Ike settled back, face pale, eyes closed. His scrawny chest rose to his measured breathing. He wrestled with the idea of death and muttered, "If'n I do die, Clem'll be defenseless in bed, an' if'n Worth finds out where that gold is located on our claim—"

"Where is the gold?" repeated Funeral.

"Reckon I'd better tell you," said Grizzly. He spoke rapidly, quickly, spilling out the location. Then, his story told, he settled back, thin lips muttering some bits of old remembered bits of prayer. Despite the gravity of the situation, Funeral O'Neill had to smile.

"All right, Grizzly, get ready to hit the trail."

"You gonna try to get me to town?"

"You ain't gonna die," growled Funeral. "Not now, anyway. . . ."

Grizzly Ike cursed. "You—you tricked me, huh?" He smiled widely then. "O'Neill, you got a mind on you, I repeat. . . ."

WITH Grizzly Ike braced between them, they went to the horses of Worth and Shane. Off yonder, Grizzly Ike had tied his horse. Between the two of them, they got the wizened man in saddle; he hung over the horn.

"I can't make it inter town. . . ." he said. "Ol' Hans Jorgenson, the sheepherder, is runnin' his herd to the south. . . .About three miles over there, I reckon."

Thirty minutes later, Funeral *helloed* in front of a frame shack. His shrill voice broke through the clamor of the excited dogs and brought Hans Jorgenson to the door, clad in dirty long underwear. They got Grizzly Ike inside, helped him on the bed. Hans Jorgenson pulled on his pants. Funeral told him what had happened.

"Sure, I'll watch the ol' buzzard," declared Hans Jorgenson. "I can turn my ewes in the wire-pasture an' stay with him until Doc arrives."

"Damnit," said Grizzly Ike, "I don't cotton much to a sheepnurse ridin' herd on me." Despite his pain his lips wore a twisted grin.

"He don't mean nothin'," explained Hans Jorgenson. "He usta be a cowpoke an' he always ribs me about herdin' sheep. You don't reckon Jake Worth an' Waldo Shane trailed you over this way, do you?"

"Don't reckon so," admitted Funeral. Jorgenson had boiled some coffee and it warmed the lanky undertaker's gullet. He lit his pipe, leaned back in the homemade chair. Outside the rain pelted down on the roof. "But they prob'ly found our horses—we left 'em up there in the rimrock."

"Prob'ly did," said Ringbone, around a peppermint.

Using some clean sheeting, they rebound Grizzly Ike's wounded side. The sharp edge of the pain gone, the first sting of shock leaving him, the prospector balanced on one elbow, cursing Worth and Shane and the weather and the world in general.

There was little they could do until sunrise. The intense darkness and the slashing rain made farther travel useless. Funeral O'Neill slouched in his chair, head on his chest. Although he seemed presumably at rest, actually many thoughts were in the gaunt man.

Most of these centered, of course, around Worth and Shane. He knew that soon this whole affair would burst, and the flame of guns would afford the solution. A touch of fear for young Clem Jones' safety tugged at him but he discarded it, remembering the gun Clem had hiden under his pillow.

Old Grizzly slept, his chest rising to measured breathings. And Funeral knew that soon the prospector—in a matter of days—would be all right.

THE dawn was leaden in a cloud-swollen sky when the partners rode out. Angling across wind-swept rainy hills, they headed back into the rough country. They rode the ridges, deliberately skylining themselves against scrub pine and boulders, and Funeral saw that their progress was being watched.

"Yonderly," he said.

Behind them, still miles away, Ringbone Smith made out the dim forms of two riders, and his keen eyes recognized the horses instantly as those of his and Funeral's. A sharp whistle escaped his chilled lips.

"Jake Worth an' Waldo Shane. . . Tho. two hellions musta spent a miserable night out here in the badlands. . . .Why for do you figure they aim to foller us, Funeral?"

Funeral spoke around a water-soaked pipe. "They figure old Grizzly's done told us about where the gold is hid, of course."

"They aim to trail us, huh?" Ringbone chewed thoughtfully, his furrowed forehead somber. "We oughta skip aroun' a little bit an' shove 'em off on a cold trail."

"Let 'em foller us."

Discovery creek was a rushing, mountainous stream swollen by rain. They put their broncs into it, splashing them across the muddy water to the small meadow on the other side—the meadow wherein stood the log cabin of Grizzly Ike and Clem Jones. Funeral noticed, as they

(Continued On Page 80)

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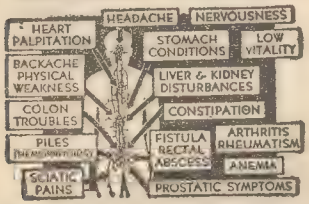

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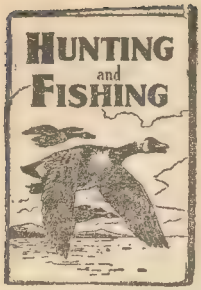

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(Continued From Page 78)

crossed the stream, that the swollen waters had washed out the sluice boxes. Only log uprights remained to mark their former locations.

For some time they sat their broncs in the brush below the house, scrutinizing it carefully. No smoke trickled from the stone chimney; no sign of habitation existed. Only then did they ride up to the place.

Ground-tying their broncs, they went inside. Although the place was empty now, it showed signs of recent occupancy. Muddy boots had tramped mud and water across the pine floor. A miner's pick had been driven hard into the flooring, ripping some of it loose.

Against the far wall, its rock shattered and smashed out of place, lay the remains of what had once been a rock fireplace. Sheeting had been ripped from the wall, exposing the inner cavity between it and the outer log wall. Funeral O'Neill took in the scene with battered, twisted lips.

"While we was takin' Grizzly Ike to Jorgenson's, Worth an' Shane have paid this place a little visit. Tore it up some, lookin' for gold."

"Them dirty sons," growled Ringbone Smith. "Tore a good shack plumb to hell. If'n ol' Grizzly could see this, he'd die of a mad spell."

Funeral cast a glance at the ceiling. Saplings, forming eaves, ran upward, met and were supported by a heavier ridge-pole. "Only thing they didn't touch was the ceiling," he said. "Get the table over here, will you?"

CLEM JONES and Grizzly Ike had hidden their gold cleverly. They had hollowed out part of the ridge-pole and covered the top part with one of the eaves. Then they had poured their dust into the secret cavity. And they had plugged the hole with a carefully made plug of pine the color and grain of the ridge pole.

Using his jack-knife, Funeral lifted the plug out. The glint of yellow metal, dull in the semi-darkness, met his gaze. Then he replaced the plug, stepped from the chair, and dropped to the floor.

They pushed the table back against

(Continued On Page 82)

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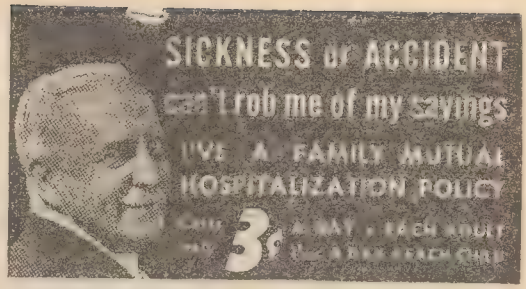

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(Continued From Page 80)

the wall. "Gold all there," murmured the undertaker.

"We better take it into town," said Ringbone. "Safer there. . . ."

Funeral shook his hangdog head. "Disagree with you, pard," he murmured. "You got a sack on your saddle, I notice. Go out and untie it from your saddlestrings. Take your time because there'll be eyes watchin' you an' we want them to see good what you're doin'."

When Ringbone had taken the sack inside, Funeral scooped dry gravel from under a broken piece of flooring, using a pan as a shovel. He filled the bottom of the sack, juggled it, and nodded.

"Reckon we got enough weight," he said. "Now we'll mosey outside an' tie this on my saddle."

They worked deliberately, standing in the driving rain. And Funeral O'Neill, despiet his dead-pan features, felt a tingle touch his spine. Even now, Worth and Shane might be hiding in the neearby brush, rifles raised. But he figured not; they had not traveled fast enough to reach the cabin yet.

They went back inside. The cabin set against the brush, and they went out a far window. Unnoticed, they went through the brush, rifles in hand. Panting, sliding in the mud, Funeral led the way, silently cursing the rain.

Sufficient altitude gained, the pards settled down under a boulder, rifles across their knees. True to Funeral's unvoiced predictions, Jake Worth and Waldo Shane had drawn up and were watching them from a high hill, about four hundred yards to the south. They had left their horses tied in a motte of chokecherry bushes.

"They've seen us at the shack," said Funeral dryly. "They're too far off for accurate Winchester work, but let's let 'em know we're in the country, huh?"

Whiskery cheeks settled against smooth stocks; hammers fell, rose, fell. The broncs of Worth and Shane, terrified by the spattering bullets, turned to run with trailing reins. Now Worth and Shane, running from the brush, snagged reins

and grabbed stirrups. They hit leather, ran over the ridge, and fell out of view.

Funeral lowered his rifle. "Well, we scared hell outa 'em," he said. "That was all we could do at that range."

Ringbone Smith dug out a peppermint. "But they won't give up, Funeral; them kind never give up—"

"They do," said Funeral, "when you kill 'em. . . ."

ON THE long ride back to Calico, Funeral O'Neill kept his eyes peeled and his ears open. Once, at a distance, he glimpsed the shadowy forms of two horsemen, moving through the rain. His vigilance decreased as they reached the level country.

On the outskirts of Calico, they reined up; they glanced sharply over their backtrail, but saw no riders. Funeral knew then that Jake Worth and Waldo Shane, realizing the partners were riding for town, had circled around and beaten them into Calico. And when they rode into the livery-barn the undertaker saw that his earlier assumptions had been correct. For the horses ridden by Shane and Worth stood in stalls, unsaddled and munching hay.

"What t'hell happened?" asked the old hostler. "You men ride out on two broncs an' Shane an' Worth ride 'em back. Then you ride in on the broncs that them two rode out on. You gents decide to trade hosses?"

"Temporarily, yes," acknowledged Funeral. "How's young Clem Jones farin' this mornin'?"

"Just had a talk with Doc Benton. He says the kid's pickin' up right pert. What you all got in that sack, O'Neill?"

"Gold," said Funeral. "Belongs to Grizzly Ike an' Clem Jones. Say, where could we leave it where it'd be safe?"

"Deputy sheriff's got an office down the street a ways. Me, I ain't got no use for the o'nery cuss—he's lazy an' worthless but he's better'n no law at all, I reckon. You'll see the sign."

With Funeral carrying the sack, they went down the street, where the

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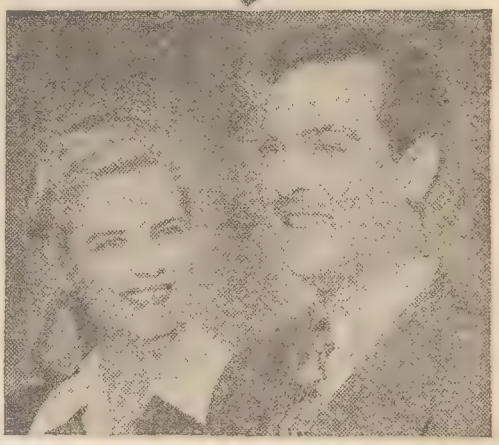

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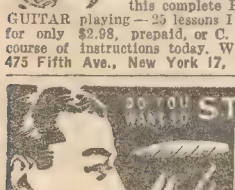

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undertaker beat at the door of the deputy's office. No reply came and the lanky man frowned—the hour was late enough to warrant the deputy's presence. He pounded again.

"What t'hades you want?" a sleepy, angry voice demanded inside.

"Open up."

Finally the door opened. The deputy, a potbellied fellow, rubbed his eyes, then stared at the sack. He had pulled on his pants and his suspenders were dangling. "What's goin' on?"

"Gold in this sack," said Funeral. "Belongs to Grizzly Ike an' Clem Jones. You keep it for them until the bank opens?"

"Reckon so." The deputy sat on his bunk, pulled on his socks. "But I can't sit here an' wet-nurse a passel of dust, men. I ain't had breakfast yet."

Funeral felt anger pull at him. But he held it, despite the fact he wanted to remind the deputy that he and Ringbone hadn't had breakfast, either.

"Okay," he said, "you go out an' get some chow. Me an' Ringbone'll hol' down this spot until you come back."

The deputy, after washing his bloated face, left with the words, "I'll be back in a few minutes, men," and the door closed behind him. Funeral worked quickly. He locked the front door behind the deputy and then he and Ringbone went out the back, settling down in a shed in the alley.

The place had once been a henhouse. The stale odor of wet chicken manure assailed their nostrils. But, if they noticed it, they did not show it. Rifles across their thighs, they hunkered there and waited.

Time ran out its drizzly length. Rain slapped noisily on the roof and ran down between the cracks. A trickle of rain water suddenly landed on Funeral's southwester; he tilted his head back, let it drip down on the back of his slicker.

"M a y b e," murmured Ringbone, "we're playin' out a cold deck, Funeral."

"They want that gold," said Funeral, "an' they'll come after it.

When we come down the street with the sack, they was watchin' us from the window of the Wishbone saloon. Set light, fella."

"What if they try the front door?"

Funeral shook his head. "Not in plain sight of the town—they won't try that—They'll figure we're still inside an' they'll try to sneak up to a window to run some lead into us—"

"Listen!"

Ears keened, Funeral listened. The sing of the wind, the splatter of rain, and somewhere a dog was barking—He shifted, rifle rising, his gaunt smile emotionless on his thin lips.

"Here they come, pard. . . ."

THERE were two forms moving out there in the alley. Two men with rifles; men dressed in dark slickers. Cautiously they came, moving from building to building; pausing now and then, scouting the distance ahead. With silent breath, the two watched and waited—waited until the pair had passed.

Only then did Funeral O'Neill and Ringbone Smith get to their feet and move out into the alley. Ringbone Smith's rotund face was bleak, his unchewed peppermint rested under his teeth. Funeral O'Neill's gaunt, sunken face was a death-mask. But inside the man ran the see-saw of his thoughts.

They spread out and then, Ringbone Smith slipped in the mud. The veterinary fell to one knee, his rifle automatically rising. Despite the rain, Jake Worth and Waldo Shane heard his fall. They pivoted then, rifles ready.

Jake Worth stared, eyes bugging. Spidery Waldo Shane seemed lined against the dark background, a slender rod beside the heavy, stolid Worth. They stood like that for a long moment, their eyes showing their surprise, and through the rain came the heavy boom of Jake Worth's voice.

"Tricked us, huh?"

Funeral O'Neill said, "In more ways than one, Worth. You givin' yourself an' this long-legged hairpin up to us?"

Worth asked, "On what charge?"

"You two shot Grizzly Ike. He can

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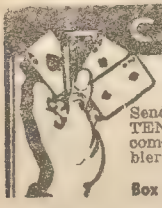

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testify against you. Better drop them rifles an' put up your hands."

Waldo Shane's green eyes were darting lights. "Grizzly Ike's dead," he said thinly. "He kain't testify against us. Dead men can't make purty speechs, O'Neill."

Funeral O'Neill's cadaverous head showed negation. "No, Shane, Grizzly Ike didn't die. He's safe an' sound now an' ready to talk. . . . He told us where the gold was an' we took it into town for safe-keepin'. . . ."

Waldo Shane's green eyes flared. "So we figured rightly, Jake," he murmured. "There was gold in that sack these hellions lugged in. . . . Our gold it'll be an' nobody'll be the wiser. . . ."

"Only a coupla dead men found in an alley," grunted Jake Worth. "Names of O'Neill an' Smith an' nobody'll ever know who killed them—" Without warning the massive man let his hammer drop. A movement designed for deception, jerked his rifle upward as he fired—but he did not jerk it high enough.

Funeral O'Neill's rifle was speaking. The undertaker did not raise it; he shot with it low, aiming by instinct instead of sight. He saw Jake Worth's mighty body flinch, and Jake Worth shot again. And Jake Worth missed because he was falling under Funeral's second bullet.

Funeral O'Neill turned, rifle jutting. Then, he held fire—Waldo Shane was done for, he had dropped his gun. Quickly the undertaker glanced at Ringbone Smith and a sudden fear knifed through him. Shane went down, and Ringbone coughed deeply. He put his hand over his mouth, spat, then looked at the peppermint there.

"Danged near choked myself, Funeral."

Funeral said, angrily, "You idiot, I figured you was hurt— Let's get out of here, quick."

"Maybe them two ain't—"

"They're dead," grunted the undertaker. "No man could live with the bullets they got in them—"

A few minutes later, when the deputy found them, they were seated in Clem Jones' room, sipping coffee the

(Continued On Page 88)

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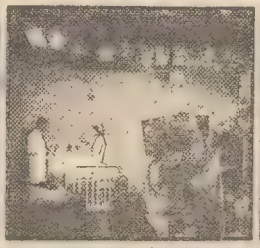

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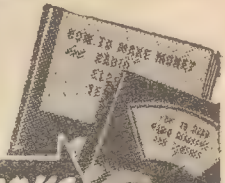

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(Continued From Page 86)

clerk had sent up. The deputy's eyes were wild.

"Hey," he hollered, "I thought you guys was goin' stay in my office an' guard that dust!" He didn't wait for an answer. "You know what happened back of my place? Jake Worth an' Waldo Shane had a gun set-to an' by hell, they both kilt the other off! We jus' toted them into the morgue."

"Good riddance," said Clem, dryly.

"You better get back to that gold," said Funeral.

"Reckon I better," said the deputy. "Sure funny how two men'll fall out—" His boots and words trailed off down the hall. Funeral looked at Ringbone and smiled wearily. He was sleepy and wet and tired, but yet he felt good.

"That deputy's sure dumb," he said. "Wonder if he'll get suspicious of us when he finds out that sack is filled with gravel?"

"He ain't got that much brains," said Ringbone.

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Death Loads the Stick

(Continued From Page 57

wall over Watson's head. That was because Watson's bullet had killed Hartman on his feet.

Hartman's knees went out and he hit the floor, lying beside the inert body of old Rakestraw, the man he had killed. The spectators, caught unaware in the gunfire, had hit the floor. They crowded around Watson who held his bleeding shoulder and cursed.

"What happened, sheriff?"

"Read that stick. I gotta get to the doc." Watson ran out the doorway, heading for the doctor's house. One man stumbled through the stick of type. He read the want ad slowly. Then he next read

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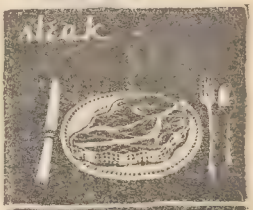

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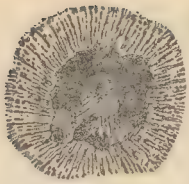

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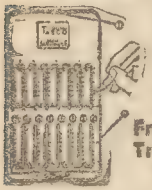

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(Continued From Page 50)

lars I just recovered from Gloring. The bank's already identified that mo. . y. A lynch mob may soon be howling outside. There ain't no evidence against the kid here b'cause there was no money found on him. Looks like you did the job alone, Cald en, and nobody'd ever believe your cock and bull story about that poster which I've already burned."

Holcolm paused to let what he'd said soak in with both Gloring and Caldeen. "If you tell me right quick where you cached the rest of the money," he went on, "I'll see if I can use my influence with the townspeople. If we don't get the rest of the money back, I might be tempted to let a lynching party have you without puttin' up any too big a struggle."

Caldeen growled through the bars. "You can go to hell."

Holcolm only chuckled. He'd been sheriff a long time, had had plenty of experience. Caldeen would talk soon enough. Killers always did when they faced a lynching. Any man would give up a few dollars to gain a fair court trial rather than letting himself be hanged to a tree immediately. Holcolm could arrange what threats were necessary.

As he moved back toward his office, the sheriff chuckled again. "I'll get all the bank money back and my own money, too." His attention was attracted to the street outside. Julie and Carl were just driving past. Julie waved to him. Holcolm waved back through the window. The kids were going some place on a honeymoon, he guessed.

(THE END)

COMING

"MOUNTAIN JUSTICE"

A Judge Bete Story

By Lee Floren

(Continued From Page 40)

and Blanding kept his mouth shut about your note like I figured. From here it's a cinch. He thinks you're bluffing. So you can ride tonight, and I'll see you out at the bunkhouse in the morning. *Saul.*

"Thought so," he murmured. "Saul's been letting Tanner's gang hide out in that old rundown bunkhouse out at his place. No wonder the crusty old devil acts like a hermit out there, and never has any visitors to speak of. I knew something was funny when Tanner referred to our Mr. Horgan as 'Saul,' when I was talkin' with him, Muley. A man doesn't use a first name when referrin' to an old gink like Saul unless he knows him."

"You—you mean Saul's in cahoots with Tanner? But what for?"

"He was," Jim said grimly. "He invited Tanner up here, when Texas got too hot for him, realizing you and I are the only law in this wild stretch of country. Saul gave 'em a hideout in his bunkhouse, in return for a cut of their profits, I reckon. And their plan to get rid of me was simple. They were just gonna make me look like a fool, so folks'd *laugh* me out of office. It was slick, but it didn't work.

"Tanner didn't get any of Saul's money out of the bank. Just made it *look* that way, so I'd lose face. And so I'd come hotfootin' out after the gang, and they could trap me. Tanner was gonna beat up on me, to make me look even more ridiculous, comin' back to town empty-handed."

"Well—I'll—be—damned."

"So'll Saul," Jim grinned. "Come on. We got work to do. Gotta tote Tanner back to the hoosegow. Then we're gonna organize a posse—every able-bodied man in town, by golly—and pay a little social call out at Saul's bunkhouse."

Muley was grinning broadly. "And won't that old sinner be surprised to see us?"

(THE END)

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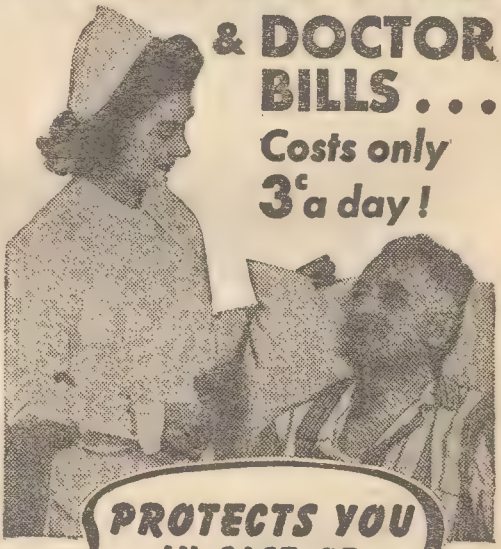

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Blood Quest of the Hawk

(Continued From Page 34)

cheon porch, and flower beds before it.

He smiled, slowly. "I was thinking, Lorrine—of home."

And the girl, looking deep into his eyes, smiled with sudden understanding.

The ebbing wind seemed to mutter approval as they swung restless h rs.3 north toward the Lazy H—and home!

(THE END)

Answer to Wild West Quiz

1. Rope it, for it is a motherless calf.
2. Scalp an Indian.
3. Die with the rawhides on, for boots were made from rawhide, and it was customary to remove them if one took time to die in bed.
4. A refuge for the wild and lawless.
5. The sky, for he slept out.
6. A stag dance, for women were mighty scarce in some places.
7. Food.
8. Vaqueros.
9. Beaver skins.
10. Rawhide.

How "Buffalo Bill" Earned His Nickname

(Continued From Page 24)

failed too, Brigham lost patience, and was likely as not to drop the matter then and there.

"Well, mister," said the captain with a grin as he took his departure, "from now on you're 'Buffalo Bill' Cody, to me."

It was this episode that fastened the title of "Buffalo Bill" on Cody, and learning it, the friends of Billy Comstock, chief of scouts at Fort Wallace, filed a verbal protest. Comstock, they said, had a well-earned reputation as a bison hunter, and was Cody's superior. Arguments over the matter grew so torrid that a match

(Continued On Page 96)

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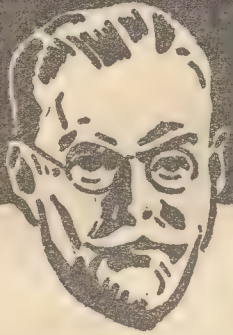

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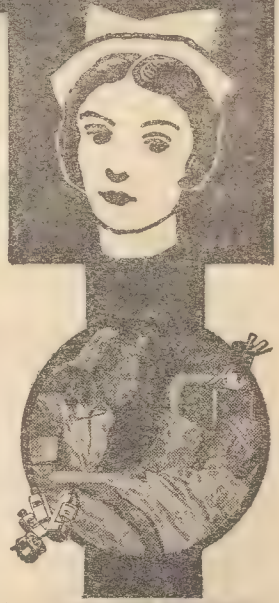

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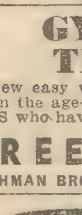

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How "Buffalo Bill" Earned His Nickname

(Continued From Page 94)

was arranged to determine whether it should be "Buffalo Bill" Cody or "Buffalo Bill" Comstock.

The hunting ground was fixed near Sheridan, Kansas, and a goodly crowd of spectators were attracted by the news of the contest. Officers, soldiers, plainsmen, and railroad workers took a day off to witness the competition, and one excursion party came all the way from St. Louis to see the sport.

Referees or judges were appointed to follow each contestant, and keep an accurate tally of the buffaloes slain. Billy Comstock was mounted on his favorite horse and carried a Henry rifle of large caliber. Brigham and Lucretia Borgia went with William Cody. The two huntsmen rode side by side until the first herd was sighted and the warning given, when off they dashed to attack, separating to the right and to the left.

In this first onslaught Cody killed thirty-eight and Comstock twenty-three. They had ridden many miles and the carcasses of the dead animals were scattered all over the prairie. Chuck was served at noon, but scarcely was it over before another herd was spotted, composed mainly of cows with their calves. The toll of this bunch was fourteen and eighteen, in favor of young Cody.

In those days the prairies were alive with bison, and a third herd put in an appearance before the hunters' rifle barrels were cooled. In order to give Brigham a share in the glory, Cody pulled off his saddle and bridle rode bareback to the kill. That closed the contest. Score: Comstock, forty-eight; Cody, sixty-nine. The challenger's friends gave up and admitted defeat, so William F. Cody was dubbed "Champion Buffalo Hunter of the Plains."

(THE END)

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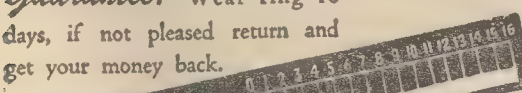

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- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

Electrical Courses
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- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Power House Electric
- ☐ Practical Electrician
- ☐ Practical Telephony
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering

Internal Combustion Engines Courses
- ☐ Auto Technician ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Diesel-Electric
- ☐ Diesel Engines ☐ Gas Engines

Mechanical Courses
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering
- ☐ Airplane Drafting
- ☐ Flight Engineer
- ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Patternmaking
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker
- ☐ Ship Drafting
- ☐ Ship Fitting
- ☐ Shop Practice
- ☐ Steel Mill Workers
- ☐ Tool Designing
- ☐ Welding, Gas and Electric

Radio Courses
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Radio, General
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing

Railroad Courses
- ☐ Air Brake ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman

Steam Engineering Courses
- ☐ Boilermaking
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Engine Running
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Steam Electric
- ☐ Steam Engines

Textile Courses
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Rayon Weaving
- ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

Business and Academic Courses
- ☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Arithmetic ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ College Preparatory
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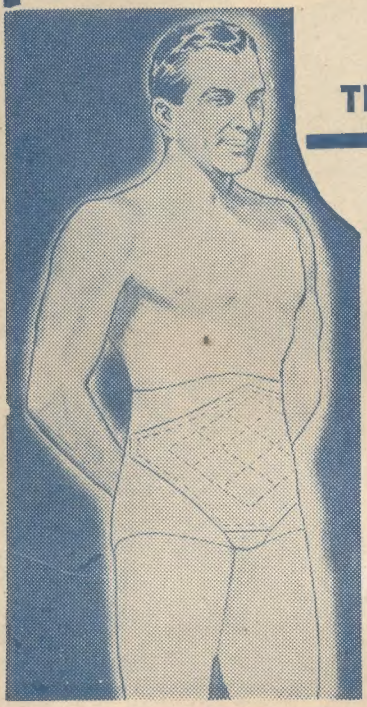


MAKE THIS TEST WITH YOUR OWN HANDS AND FEEL WHAT WE MEAN

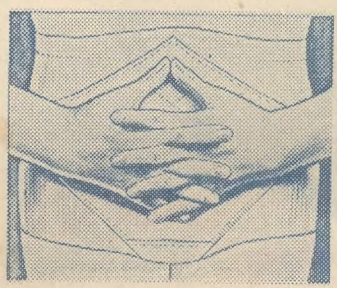
Yes, instantly you, too, can begin to feel ALIVE . . . ON TOP OF THE WORLD by joining the Parade of Men who are marching up the highway of happier living with the COMMANDER, the amazing new Men's abdominal supporter.

GET "IN SHAPE" INSTANTLY AND ENJOY A HAPPY STREAMLINED APPEARANCE
The COMMANDER presents the exclusively designed "INTERLOCKING HANDS" principle for extra double support where you need it most. It flattens the burdensome sagging "corporation" and restores to the body the zestful invigorating feeling that comes with firm, sure "bay window" control. Order this new belt today and begin enjoying the pleasure of feeling "in shape" at once.

BREATHE EASIER—TAKE WEIGHT OFF TIRED FEET
The helpful uplifting EXTRA SUPPORTING power of the COMMANDER firmly supports abdominal sag. The instant you pull on the belt you breathe easier . . . your wind is longer . . . you feel better!

YOUR BACK IS BRACED—YOUR CLOTHES FIT BETTER—YOU APPEAR TALLER
The COMMANDER braces your figure . . . you look and feel slimmer . . . your clothes fit you better. Your friends will notice the improvement immediately.

COMMANDER IS NEW AND MODERN!
The absence of gouging steel ribs, dangling buckles and bothersome laces will prove a joy. COMMANDER has a real man's jock type pouch. IT GIVES GENUINE MALE PROTECTION. Try this amazing new belt with full confidence . . . and at our risk. SEND FOR IT NOW!



*THE SECRET OF THE "INTERLOCKING HANDS"

Only COMMANDER contains this NEW principle. A porous non-stretch material is built into the Special stretch body of the COMMANDER . . . in the outline of two interlocking hands for EXTRA DOUBLE SUPPORT where you need it most. **NO BUCKLES, LACES OR STRAPS.**

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★ "I am sure you will be pleased to know that it is by far the best and most practical supporter I have ever had. I have been pleased to show it to several of my friends and they are likewise impressed with it. You shall probably hear from some of them in the future."
Dr. A. M. S.
Standish, Mich.

★ "Enclosed find order for another belt. I wouldn't be without this supporter for ten times what it costs."
Dr. G. C. S.
St. Charles, Ill.

★ "Received the Commander about a week ago. To say that I am well pleased with it would be putting it mildly—I can see that it fills a long felt want, giving the needed support and a most comfortable feeling. I never miss putting it on the first thing in the morning. Enclosed is my check for another."
J. C. McG.
St. Paul, Minn.

★ "I recommend the Commander for what it is made for. It sure nas been a great help to me. I want to thank you for what it has done. I might add it has helped me more than anything I have ever tried."
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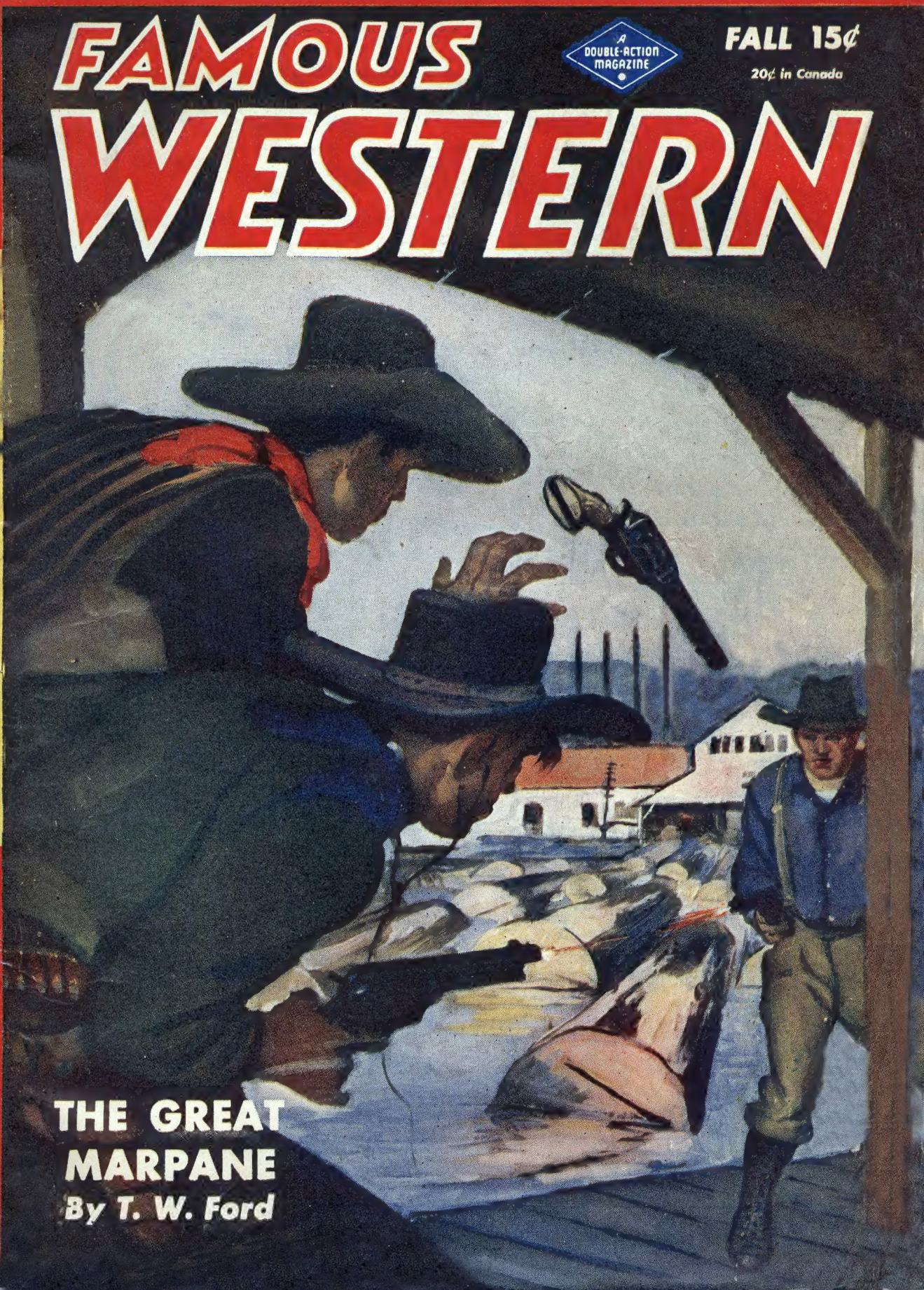

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